

Life of the Woods
A Study of Emily Dickinson
by
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I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

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Abstract

Beginning with T.W. Higginson, the poet's first public critic and posthumous editor, the prevailing view of Emily Dickinson has been of a maker of "wonderful strokes and felicities, and yet an incomplete and unsatisfactory whole," a view that is often based on her perceived strangeness as a person. More recently, Virginia Jackson has advanced the view of Dickinson's poetry as being poorly served by modern methods of practical criticism, "dependent on their artifactual contexts" and on thoughts "too intimate for print." Unabashedly practical in its approach, this thesis argues that the general shape of Dickinson's life reveals her writings as the product of her personal quest for growth, and that, further, her reclusive habits reflect this quest. Dickinson's removal from the ordinary modes of life in her town parallels Henry David Thoreau's more transient life in the woods. No less than Thoreau, Dickinson wished "to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life," but the combined pressures of gender and social situation placed restrictions on how Dickinson might do so as a woman. Yet while she did not take up an abode in the woods, Dickinson's home life enabled her to live in the manner of the woods—a symbol of inexhaustible diversity in the poet's imagination, and an endless source of significance beyond her conscious will. The title of the study hints at the mode of life the poet associates with this uncharted, enchanted place.

The Introduction uses Dickinson's early letters to Higginson to trace out her project as a poet in light of mid-nineteenth century critical principles. It shows how the poet repeatedly draws a distinction between herself as a person and herself as a poet, and how the theory of organic form which was dominant in her time helps to clarify her aesthetic achievements, while it also offers an explanation of why she never sought to publish her works.

The main argument of this thesis is composed of two parts. Part I is composed of three chapters, all of which concern challenges posed by Dickinson's writing. The first chapter considers several significant aspects of Dickinson's autograph manuscripts, rejecting the materialist theories of some recent writers on the subject while also considering what the manuscripts tell us about the poet on the page. The second and third chapters explore the main purpose of Dickinson's non-verbal notation, her use of non-standard conventions of orthography and punctuation (including capitalisation), and also her use of line breaks.

Part II is also composed of three chapters, each of which focuses on distinct topics to offer new perspectives on Dickinson's poems. The fourth chapter examines several poems in light of the tradition of natural visionary wisdom that flourished in New England in Dickinson's time. The fifth chapter applies the literary conception of paradox to several of Dickinson's more challenging poems, showing how the mode of paradox allows her to grasp the fuller sense of experience. The subject of the last chapter is death, immortality, and the "Immortality" the poet associates with enchanted earthly experience.

The Conclusion describes an important function of Dickinson's poetry—it offers to make us conscious of what is strange, wonderful, and unknowable in the world. A few prospects for the next stage of the study are also described.

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To my wife, Melanie,
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all makers of joy in their own peculiar ways

Contents

List of Abbreviations	x
Inerrata: A Note on Dickinson's Spellings	xi
Introduction	1
Part I	
Chapter One The Poet's Hand and Mechanical Reproduction	51
Chapter Two Preserving the Silvan Way 1: Orthography and Punctuation	80
Chapter Three Preserving the Silvan Way 2: Lineation and Stanzas	109
Part II	
Chapter Four Disclosing the Natural	133
Chapter Five "Plain english" and the Mode of Paradox	171
Chapter Six Of Death and the Earth	203
Conclusion This Mortal Abolition, This Loved Philology: The Great Cause of Poetry	233
Works Cited	239

List of Abbreviations

- ADEL* Noah Webster, *An American Dictionary of the English Language*. 2 vols. Amherst, MA, J.S. & C. Adams, 1844. Accessed through *Emily Dickinson Lexicon*, Cynthia Hallen, ed., <http://edl.byu.edu/index.php>, 2007.
- AM* *The Atlantic Monthly*
- BPL* Boston Public Library
- EL* Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays and Lectures*. The Library of America. New York, NY: Literary Classics of the United States, 1983.
- Fasc.* Fascicle, a term first used by Todd in the “Preface” to *Poems by Emily Dickinson* (1891), where it is spelled “fascicule,” to refer to the forty little books of poems Dickinson copied by hand and bound with string. This abbreviation is always followed by a number, which indicates Franklin’s scheme.
- F* *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Variorum Edition*. 3 vols. Ed. R.W. Franklin. Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1998. This abbreviation is always followed by a number, which indicates Franklin’s numbering of Dickinson’s poems.
- J* *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*. 3 vols. Ed. Thomas H. Johnson. Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1955. This abbreviation is always followed by a number, which indicates Johnson’s numbering of Dickinson’s poems.
- L* *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*. 3 vols. Eds. Thomas H. Johnson and Theodora Ward. Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1958. This abbreviation is always followed by a number, which indicates Johnson’s numbering of Dickinson’s letters. Where my own parenthetical dating differs from Johnson and Ward’s, I draw on Franklin’s “Re-dated Letters” in *F*.
- Letters* See previous entry.
- LYC* Thomas Wentworth Higginson, “Letter to a Young Contributor.” *Atlantic Monthly* 9.54 (April 1862): 401-11.
- OED* Simpson, J.A., and E.S.C. Weiner, eds. *OED Online*. Oxford UP. <http://oed.com>, 1989-(ongoing).

Inerrata: A Note on Dickinson's Spellings

Dickinson's spellings are retained in all quotations from her poems. Frequent examples include "opon" (for upon), as well as many mis-contracted words, e.g. dont, could'nt, hav'nt, their's, and it's (as a possessive pronoun). The repeated word in "should my my slowness" (page 41) appears in Dickinson's manuscript, as do the following words: "Extasy" (page 147), "Necessity" (page 197), "exhilarate" (page 220). I explore the topic of Dickinson's spellings in Chapter 2.

Introduction

Emily Dickinson's writings present a formidable challenge to readers, and though she now enjoys an important position in the poetic literature of English, her poems and letters are often criticised for being unnecessarily mannered and obscure. Even in her own century, many of those who read Dickinson's work seem to have thought the same. Thomas Wentworth Higginson, the New England writer who Dickinson contacted during the Civil War for an opinion about her poems, was the first to express this opinion publicly. He did so in an article that appeared in the *Christian Register* six weeks before *Poems by Emily Dickinson* (published 12 November 1890), a selection which Higginson had co-edited with Mabel Loomis Todd and which his article was intended to promote:

Emerson said, many years since, in the "Dial," that the most interesting department of poetry would hereafter be found in what might be called "The Poetry of the Portfolio"; the work, that is, of persons who wrote for the relief of their own minds, and without thought of publication. Such poetry, when accumulated for years, will have at least the merit of perfect freedom; accompanied, of course, by whatever drawback follows from the habitual absence of criticism. Thought will have its full strength and uplifting, but without the proper control and chastening of literary expression; there will be wonderful strokes and felicities, and yet an incomplete and unsatisfactory whole. If we believe, with Ruskin, that "no beauty of execution can outweigh one grain or fragment of thought," then we may often gain by the seclusion of the portfolio, which rests content with a first stroke and does not over-refine and prune away afterwards. Such a sheaf of unpublished verse lies before me, the life-work of a woman so secluded that she lived literally indoors by choice for many years, and within the limits of her father's estate for many more—who shrank even from the tranquil society of a New England college town, and yet loved her few friends with profound devotedness, and divided her life between them and her flowers. (392)

Higginson is not referring only to flowers like day-lilies, a couple of which Dickinson gave him when he visited her for the first time at her Amherst home (“Emily Dickinson’s Letters” 452).

The notion of poems as flowers is a stock idea with long roots, but Higginson freshens it up by making it clear that he is not referring to the normal cultivated variety of poetry, observing in the final paragraph of his article: “Her verses are in most cases like poetry plucked up by the roots; we have them with earth, stones, and dew adhering, and must accept them as they are” (393).

Though it has undergone some alterations over the years since it was first expressed, this opinion has proven to be as perennial as Dickinson’s poems.

A good number of critics since Higginson have followed his lead, finding a good deal of the same strangeness in Dickinson’s life and works. She herself may have foreseen this, saying in a poem—

Much Madness is Divinest Sense -
To a discerning Eye -
Much Sense - the starkest Madness -
'Tis the Majority
In this, as all, prevail -
Assent - and you are sane -
Demur - you're straightway dangerous -
And handled with a Chain - (c. second half of 1863, Fasc.29/F620)

R.P. Blackmur quotes this poem in a lucid essay on Dickinson’s notation, using it to illustrate “what happens to poetry when it is released from the patterning barriers of syntax and the force of residual reason” (236), which seems a very odd thing to say once we recognise how deftly the poem’s form imitates its argument. Reworking the old commonplace that relates wisdom to insanity, Dickinson’s poem shows a special concern with the kind of “madness” that issues forth in the kind of writing that moved Higginson’s wife to ask him of Dickinson: “Oh why do the

insane so cling to you?”—and him to admit, after visiting Dickinson for the second and last time in Amherst, that the assessment “still holds” (qtd. in *Letters*, II.519). The poem represents what, if viewed from the perspective of the poetic tradition, is not insanity but simply enthusiasm or inspiration; it makes what is justly called “Divinest Sense”—which in turn makes “Much Sense” appear to be “the starkest Madness.”

Blackmur admits Dickinson is “very skilful,” but he does so for the wrong reason, claiming that she “has all instinct to bring to bear” and is “not very conscious of it” (235). He remarks:

One exaggerates, but it sometimes seems as if in her work a cat came at us speaking English, our own language, but without the pressure of all the other structures we are accustomed to attend; it comes at us all voice so far as it is in control, fragmented elsewhere, wilful and arbitrary, because it has not the acknowledged means to be otherwise. (227)

These comments reflect the fact of Dickinson’s rugged style without perceiving its sense. What is most striking about Dickinson’s oeuvre is that, though voluminous, the bulk of it never dips below a certain level of thought, which is high. The fact that this applies as well to worksheets and drafts suggests that she succeeded pretty well on the first pass, or else that she composed in her mind before setting any words on the page. That the worksheets and drafts are not noticeably rougher in expression than poems Dickinson revised many times suggests that she was satisfied with a roughened style. To “over-refine and prune away afterwards” was never her goal as a poet.

Dickinson does come off sounding less than lucid sometimes, but these experiences become fewer each time we trust her enough to follow her train of thought. At such times, the claims of “residual reason” seem to bear very little on Dickinson’s work, and it becomes quite

easy to understand why she figures “Much Sense” as a “Chain,” and why possessing such sense seems like “the starkest Madness” to her. She makes a patent demand for “a discerning Eye,” which seems perfectly reasonable considering the nature of her work, which is radically removed from the ordinary sphere of experience; my own experience suggests that she is better approached with humility than condescension.

Yet Blackmur is not the only serious critic who has followed in the missteps of Higginson. Following closely upon Blackmur in his perspective, David Porter offers a survey of Dickinson’s corpus in his second monograph on her, *Dickinson: The Modern Idiom* (1981). This critic corroborates his view by citing the brevity of Dickinson’s works and identifying a range of the difficulties they pose for reading. Porter acknowledges his debt to Higginson explicitly, citing the *Christian Register* article to conclude: “It was not that she was impatient with finality, for that in itself demands a choice and a strong bias. She suffered from a profound inability to effect finality” (181). Though Porter intends to make the best case for Dickinson, it is hard not to think that her supposed “inability” is catastrophic for a poet. According to Porter, Dickinson’s “work lacks architectural dimension to direct the reader’s activity within its space” (3), “her poems ... pretend an authoritative relationship to the actual world even though they flee from that world” (131); hers is “a canon of odds and ends, a chatter of word play that disengages from and replaces outside reality, contradictory in attitudes, it evinces what the artist was able to create: an identifiable style and an identifiable but undefined presence” (181-2), to which Porter adds: “the poems could not be arranged by her to make an address toward or priority about the world” (182). Rounding out his portrait of the poet, Porter finds “an eerie absence of artistic self-consciousness” in Dickinson’s corpus, and even in her letters to Higginson “no discussion ... of what it is to be a poet” (184). Dickinson, according to this view, is a poet of sheer lack.

As an attempt to make sense of an extraordinary body of writings, Porter's view does account for a number of its apparent qualities, which adds to its persuasive force. But as the mature opinion of one of the poet's most influential critics Porter's catalogue is devastating, showing a destructive lack of insight into a living body of poems. Closer attention to Dickinson's style shows that, whether they are judged as a whole or by the piece, her works are no more shapeless than anyone could fairly expect of a corpus of lyrics as rich in significance and as large, and which saw print only after its author's death. Yet Porter is one of the first career students of Dickinson's art, and though his view has been challenged it remains influential. Responding to Porter's assertion that Dickinson "is the only major American poet without a project" (*Modern* 152), Gary Lee Stonum asserts that "the coherence of Dickinson's literary enterprise is of an unusual kind" (5), adding that her poems constitute "some alternative coherence or design, something which might circumvent the temptation to be ruled by a 'Monarch' or to be the monarch herself" (15). She skirts "conventional forms of authorial control" in order "to imagine some form of power that might transcend the limitations of mastery and to imagine a kind of poetry that might draw upon such power" (21). Stonum's view reflects a good part of the scholarship over the past thirty years, which has been dominated by the idea that Dickinson typically sustains her ambiguities, and that "resolving" them into a coherent meaning is tantamount to critical violence. Two years later, in her second monograph on the poet, *Choosing Not Choosing: Dickinson's Fascicles* (1992), Sharon Cameron considers the boundedness of discrete poems and their interrelations in Dickinson's handwritten, self-bound books to explore questions about "what constitutes the identity of the poem," and to argue that "Dickinson's fascicles ... embody the problem of identity" (4). More recently, Shira Wolosky asserts of Dickinson's poems: "Opposing possibilities contend against each other with greater or

lesser violence, and each imagined resolution is ultimately judged unsatisfactory” (429-30). Like Porter, these critics seek to describe Dickinson’s artistic achievement, but the view of the poet as being too divided to make coherent structures of meaning goes against what readers have traditionally expected to find in poems. The present study is based on the opposing view that Dickinson’s style does not ultimately thwart traditional expectations of artistic coherence. Dickinson is admittedly not traditional in the sense this word takes in ordinary conversation, but she is far less formally radical than these critics insist (cf. Miller, *Reading*), and recognising what is most original in her thought depends upon making coherent sense of her poems. It remains to identify a vital order to this great body of writings, one that illuminates at once the whole and its many members.

In contrast to the image of poems as flowers “plucked up by the roots,” Dr. Johnson’s remark about Shakespeare’s writings shines good light on Dickinson’s:

The work of a correct and regular writer is a garden accurately formed and diligently planted, varied with shades, and scented with flowers; the composition of Shakespeare is a forest, in which oaks extend their branches, and pines tower in the air, interspersed sometimes with weeds and brambles, and sometimes giving shelter to myrtles and to roses; filling the eye with awful pomp, and gratifying the mind with endless diversity. (507)

Dickinson’s writings are not “correct and regular,” but that is part of what makes them so powerful. The work of Dickinson is a forest; it is very easy to get lost in, and cannot be compassed with mere ordinary measures. The view of Higginson and those who follow after him only reminds us of how hard it is to discern order in a dense mass of detail, implying this lesson for critical practice: when we find life in words but cannot make sense of them, we may be better to admit exhaustion than to project it onto the works.

Although I have never consciously sought to silence inconsistencies (whether they exist within or between the poems), being concerned to apprehend not only the general shape but also the “endless diversity” afforded by the forest of Dickinson’s writings, I have never willingly settled for this as a general view of Dickinson. It leaves too much unexplained, and resembles postmodern thought too closely to inspire confidence that it is attuned to the mind of the mid-nineteenth century poet. Though Dickinson matters chiefly for her acts of poetic flight, or her capacity for what she calls “Transport,” these acts make the most sense when they are understood in light of the “laws of gravity” as she conceived them in her place and time. While these “laws” may well be fixed for all time, as they are assumed to be in the physical world, the experience of them is obviously a historical phenomenon, and following Dickinson’s particular acts of defiance of these laws demands historical understanding. Without this, the products of our attention are bound to be more fanciful than critical.

Having considered Dickinson in light of her times with an emphasis on the literary culture, I attempt throughout to resist the temptation to reduce her poetry to a single idea, taking for a talisman her advice to

..... let not Revelation
By Theses be detained - (F1261),

which has made establishing a specific thesis a bit of a challenge, and disestablishing a few common misconceptions of the poet a necessity. Though informed by criticism of her writings, this study has developed primarily out of close attention to individual poems. This method came to seem necessary early on, the more so the more I noticed things in the writings which are either ignored by her critics or not probed too closely by them. These things left me convinced that, at this stage in the scholarship, Dickinson would be served best if received ideas about her works

were tested through a series of close readings. I began these tests with the conviction that Dickinson is not only a major poet but also a profoundly original one, and that such a poet demands an original response.

Many others have sought new things in Dickinson by treating original subjects and reading her less-examined poems. I have rather tackled than avoided the major poems and have never shunned the long-established topics, always seeking unexamined details in the former and new ways of explaining the latter. In each case these details come under the class of Dickinson's "form" in the inclusive sense: from structures of verse and other aspects of her language to the exquisite particularities of single words. Some of these subjects have already received excellent treatment in the scholarship, from which I have benefitted and which I acknowledge where appropriate. Others have not, and I do my best to perceive what is important about them. Form has in each case provided ways into Dickinson's writings and has never been taken as an end in itself.

Throughout the study I try to balance close attention to particulars with a sense of the corpus as a whole. My hope is that readers will find in this sense a certain unity, and that they will not be predisposed against finding such a thing in a body of writings at once as vast and as various as Dickinson's. With an eye on the present state of poetry criticism, I recognise that I lie quite prone to the charge of rousing the spirit of the New Critics and others who seek ultimate unities in works. From my view, this would not be such a bad thing for Dickinson, whose poems are too often read without the numberless pressures of her poetic forms. My own attention to the poems is associated with New Criticism by its use of close verbal analysis, but association is not identity, and my own approach—though unabashedly practical—relies heavily on the notion of the corpus and on historical placement in the poet's literary culture, neither of which the New

Critics are usually charged with relying on. I have done so in the belief that these notions would help counter the effects of textual criticism, not only in providing larger contexts of reference but also in assuring that the meaning drawn from the poems was not simply of my own making.

My work represents a late response to that of Porter, a critic often loosely (and falsely) associated with New Criticism. Though they are lucid and learned, Porter's many writings on Dickinson are too limited to explain this poet. This limitation is obvious from the first page of *The Art of Emily Dickinson's Early Poetry* (1966), where Porter asserts that "Dickinson's singularity as a poet resides not in what she believes—for her interests and her convictions are not original—but rather in the way she speaks to us: her voice is unique" (ix), thus implying a division between Dickinson's style and thought. Though I agree with Porter that a critic has an "obligation to be tactful and not to make the poetry seem more coherent or sound better than it is" (xi), it is clear from the rest of his writings that he feels this obligation keenly, and that he never thinks that being "coherent" was a particular strength of Dickinson's. Porter asserts in his later monograph that "Higginson described the incoherence accurately" (*Modern* 181). But the man Dickinson contacted in her early thirties and who hesitantly agreed to edit her works after her death was simply wrong. There is undoubtedly an important creative, or re-creative, aspect to criticism, but if we are to insist that the critic has an "obligation to be tactful," it must be clear that "tact" can only be determined after the attempt at reading. To be tactful, one must first be totally presumptuous about what a work means. Dickinson's writings do not always cohere, but I have been surprised how often poems and passages deemed "incomprehensible" and "incoherent" expose rather the limitations of the critics than their own. My reading of Dickinson shows her doing what poets have traditionally been expected to do: making sense of things in her own terms and manner.

Recalling Porter's assertion that Dickinson never discusses "what it is to be a poet," Stephen Cushman makes the related observation in his influential *Fictions of Form in American Poetry* (1993): "Dickinson established almost no context and no principles for the description and critical evaluation of her work" (22). Cushman then invokes Peter Ackroyd's claim that early twentieth century poets are "unique" in establishing such things (22), which makes the lack of explicit statement about her art appear perfectly normal, but he also wisely cites Whitman's anonymous reviews of his own work as a possible exception to Ackroyd's claim, to which Wordsworth's 1800 "Preface" to *Lyrical Ballads* might be added along with dozens of others, including Horace's *Ars Poetica*. It is tempting to take Wordsworth's example as an indication of the chief source of this tendency among modern poets: that all poetic apologia are based on the assumption that the neo-classical rules of art are normative in English language traditions of poetry. In any case, every poet who writes an apologia implies that the present "rules" (as much imagined as real at any time) are not adequate for describing and evaluating her work. But while apologia are not unique to twentieth century poetry, they are not at all in accord with Dickinson's tendency to self-effacement, nor with traditional conceptions of feminine modesty. Whitman's example is instructive in at least two ways. That he published his reviews under a different name suggests that establishing a context and critical principles for his work was one of the improprieties Whitman would not commit openly. That he published his poems at all reminds us that he had good practical reasons for defending and explaining his style; as a poet who controlled the circulation of her own works, avoiding conventional modes of publication, Dickinson was free of such exigencies.

What is deemed proper of course depends on the system of beliefs dominant in a given place and time, and a short passage from Higginson's "Letter to a Young Contributor," which appeared as the leading article in the *Atlantic Monthly* for April 1862 and prompted Dickinson to write to the famous man, helps to explain a way of thinking that now seems rather peculiar:

Do not waste a minute, not a second, in trying to demonstrate to others the merit of your own performance. If your work does not vindicate itself, you cannot vindicate it, but you can labor steadily on to something which needs no advocate but itself. (407)

Though Higginson was an advocate of women's rights and writing and undoubtedly meant very well, he was a professional man of letters, and, at least in the nineteenth century, "man" points at a fact of the socially gendered profession. Reminding us that convictions about the integrity of the work of art and the expectation that a text be able to stand up by itself have a longer history in criticism than is now sometimes claimed (Jackson), this passage alone would explain well why Dickinson never explicitly discusses "what it is to be a poet" in her letters to Higginson. It seems that, in Dickinson's culture, the task of commentary fell chiefly to the critic.

Higginson's article provides a compelling practical reason for why Dickinson never sought to explain and defend her unique style. Her famous imperative "Tell all the truth but tell it slant - / Success in Circuit lies" (F1263) provides a theoretical one. The fact that she never discusses "what it is to be a poet" in a straightforward manner implies a profound understanding of such matters. Once we begin to look at the writings from the appropriate angle Dickinson is seen to show a high degree of artistic self-consciousness. This quality is most sustained in her correspondence with Higginson, which shows Dickinson speaking almost entirely on behalf of her poems, not her person, especially in the early years of the correspondence.

The greatest difficulty posed by Dickinson's writings is almost certainly the fact that they appear on the page without any further context, and this fact naturally raises doubts about how well the poet could make "something which needs no advocate but itself." Jay Leyda's understanding of this difficulty has informed subsequent accounts of Dickinson's work; this is unfortunate since he reduces it to the utterance of a private poet:

A major device of Emily Dickinson's writing, both in her poems and in her letters, was what might be called the "omitted center." The riddle, the circumstance too well known to be repeated to the initiate, the deliberate skirting of the obvious—this was the means she used to increase the privacy of her communication; it has also increased our problems in piercing that privacy. (I.xxi)

Leyda's view helps to account for why the shape of Dickinson's corpus remains so poorly defined in the criticism devoted to it, but it is understandable why this view has been so persuasive. Although there is much to please in the sound of her words, Dickinson admits readers only so far into her sense without a considerable amount of intimacy. The trouble is it is not the kind of intimacy that her more ardent critics and admirers seek with her works. Though Dickinson's poems undoubtedly spring from deep personal experiences, much of her experience was gotten in books and other mental exercises, above all those of gaining a profound grasp of the many valences of words. But while her writings depend on much intimacy to comprehend, they are wrongly confused with personal utterances. Dickinson's poems do not straightforwardly record events from her personal life but represent her personal quest for spiritual growth. Hers are the writings of a poet and simply turn away readers who are not prepared to engage with her shrewd and expansive mind and her original ways of making words "breathe" (April 15, 1862, L260). They expect a reader to reenact her quest by tracing out the meanings and relations of her

words. The result is that there is probably no other major corpus of verse and prose in English as much misunderstood as hers.

Every life implies an infinite number of historical particularities, and in this sense of the word all criticism implies the poet's "biography." Yet much of the existing criticism on Dickinson puts special emphasis on her life at the expense of her poetics, and this has left the better part of her value largely unexplained. "Biography first convinces us of the fleeing of the Biographied," Dickinson remarks in a late letter (February 1885, L972), and her poems seem to flee every time her biography becomes the centre of critical attention. It is impossible to read Dickinson apart from her life, but to do so is very difficult since so many things about that life are unknown, and even the best biographies we have only consolidate (in varying degrees of comprehensiveness) what is known about the poet's life at the time they are written. From the details we learn about it in Richard Sewall's still monumental biography of her, Dickinson's life was not unremarkable but it was remarkably uneventful. This is not to say that what is recorded of this life in her letters and in the writings about it by her contemporaries is marked by much of a prosaic hue. But while new facts have come to light since *The Life of Emily Dickinson* was first published in 1974 (Habegger, Gordon, Longworth), the most striking thing about the poet's life remains the fact that she spent the bulk of her adulthood in relative simplicity, rarely left the comfortable grounds of her family home, and often devised ways to deflect visitors from it—and all this despite enjoying all the benefits and privileges of a good education, material prosperity, and easy access to the active social and cultural life of her town.

These and other things have naturally led some readers to believe the poet's line about being "The Wayward Nun - beneath the Hill" (c.1863; F745). Although it was not "cloistered," as an early reviewer claims (in Buckingham 16), there is certainly something of the monastic in

what we know of Dickinson's life. But while such things are undeniably important, they can also distract from what obviously matters most about Emily Dickinson: not the life she led in Amherst but the poems and letters she made there, and the fact that these have passed on to posterity to experience. The more we understand these facts in the historical context to which they belong, the more the poems make sense and the less the life of this remarkable woman seems strange. As usual, we are caught in the hermeneutic circle: the more we know about the poet, the more we come to find the life in her works, and vice versa. Yet, considered anew, the task of conceiving how Dickinson passed her life is made easy by the fact of its simplicity. The general shape of Dickinson's life is clear: she was at home in the world as much as any monk or dweller at Walden Pond. A few other "occasional" facts are also useful for reading specific poems, but to know how Dickinson speaks, and what her poems are saying, we mostly require only knowledge of the broad facts of her life and her intellectual culture. Adopting this simplified portrait allows the poems to take priority in the study of Dickinson's life.

In his edition of the letters, Thomas H. Johnson notes: "In place of a signature, ED enclosed a card (in its own envelope) on which she wrote her name" (403). This detail provides a clue to a theme that runs through the rest of the correspondence, physically illustrating the poet's desire to draw a distinction between herself as a poet and herself as a person. This distinction is made explicit in her fourth letter to Higginson, in which she writes: "When I state myself, as the Representative of the Verse - it does not mean - me - but a supposed person" (July 1862, L268). Although her first letter to Higginson includes no other indication that the writer has knowledge of professional etiquette, and even includes several others to the contrary, the enclosed card literally makes the point: the "life" of Dickinson is found in her works. Higginson's early letters show him relentlessly pursuing the woman, who just as relentlessly flees. That is what is most

striking about these letters—not simply that they show a woman posing, as her brother claimed to Todd (Bingham, *Ancestors*’ 167), but that they show her doing so to represent the voice of the poet. Dickinson’s letters to Higginson read very well when we take them to be addressed to him as a representative of criticism, rather than as a man. Once we know enough about Higginson to infer his part of the correspondence, Dickinson’s letters become very suggestive and charged with vital sense. There are several reasons for thinking that Dickinson actually intended them to “speak” to a general reader. The most compelling one is that she was practically forced to make them stand well by themselves. Completely unknown to Higginson, Dickinson was left to create a context through the letters and poems she addressed to him. These letters contain much that shows Dickinson had a remarkably keen insight into what she wrote, and probably Higginson’s comments helped her to clarify her motives as a poet, mostly negatively. Dickinson makes a statement to this effect in a letter she writes to Higginson, eight years into their correspondence: “You ask great questions accidentally. To answer them would be events,” adding a bit farther down: “I find no nomination sweet as your low opinion” (26 September 1870, L352), where she appears to be referring to her “nomination” to the party of poets, and to Higginson’s obtuseness as a critic.

In her second letter to Higginson, Dickinson writes, “You asked how old I was? I made no verse - but one or two - until this winter - Sir” (25 April 1862, L261). These words make up a paragraph in the letter, and they remind us how well Dickinson could distinguish between herself as poet and herself as person. Higginson could not have known then that she had written some three hundred poems by that time, and the paragraph is often quoted by her commentators to demonstrate the poet’s capacity for lying. The same approach yields also the competing interpretation that the claim is intended to be seen through—the way the words of women have

been viewed traditionally. But whether they are meant to keep her poems secret, or to be modest—or even if they are intended to disguise a boast in seeming-modesty—the approach leads to the same conclusion about the words: they are motivated chiefly by that part of Dickinson which she calls “mortal.” Such motives obviously exist, and while they should be considered the poems point in another direction.

While all people face the same common ending, poets have been conventionally deemed to be among the ones who are said to go on living. “I made no verse - but one or two - until this winter - Sir.” Though it might illuminate some interesting things about the poet as a person, to put this part of the paragraph in the spotlight obscures the greater person implied in the words. Considering it as a whole, the paragraph shows Dickinson parrying a question that shines light only on the part of her which furnishes matter for a biography. Higginson inquires about the person, Dickinson answers as the poet.

The letter in which Dickinson identifies herself as “the Representative of the Verse” opens with a question that suggests Higginson had pursued his original line of inquiry:

Could you believe me - without? I had no portrait, now, but am
small, like the Wren, and my Hair is bold, like the Chestnut Bur -
and my eyes, like the Sherry in the Glass, that the Guest leaves -
Would this do just as well? (July 1862, L268)

This passage by itself might serve as an emblem that Dickinson wants Higginson to think of her as a poet. She then explains why she has no portrait to send him:

It often alarms Father - He says Death might occur, and he has
Molds of all the rest - but has no Mold of me, but I noticed the
Quick wore off those things, in a few days, and forestall the
dishonor - You will think no caprice of me -

“Quick” here takes Webster’s first sense of the word: “primarily, alive; living; opposed to *dead* or *unanimated*” (*ADEL*), but is transformed from an adjective to a noun. The only words in the sentence that set their own standards of capitalisation, “Death,” “Molds,” “Mold,” and “Quick” are all related in a web of sense in this passage. The word “Mold,” for a daguerreotype, recalls an early poem Dickinson wrote about the science of “Comparative Anatomy,” by which a long preserved “single bone” can be “made ... to unfold” the “secret” about “some rare tenant of the mold” (c. spring 1860, Fasc.7/F147). The word “mold” in this poem is used for earth, a symbol for the matter of life and of preservation, while the “Mold” which “the Quick wore off” plays on earth as an image of death and decay. Practically, Dickinson must have known this from looking at the daguerreotypes in her family. Providing her self-portrait in words just before making the observation about the degradation of the daguerreotype itself practically implies a profounder insight. All the arts are dynamic, and the use of the term “static” to distinguish pictures from movies and statuary from the dance, is based in a physical rather than a philosophical conception; but, in Dickinson’s day, only those arts which writing is capable of preserving (e.g. poetry, or Western music) can be said to enjoy an essential longevity, or the closest thing to it.

Having sufficiently answered Higginson’s question in her fourth letter, Dickinson concludes her fifth by posing her own. It reminds us of the profusion of such portraits in the time of these two writers:

Have you the portrait of Mrs Browning? Persons sent me three -
If you had none, will you have mine?

Your Scholar -

It also provides an example of how writers in this “burgeoning culture of literary celebrity” could be “fans too,” and so know the experience of celebrity worship “from the inside” (Eisner 1, 5).

“Persons sent me three”—the first of these words is oddly anonymous, the last makes it obvious that she had at least three other people to write to at the time and was not guilty of “shunning Men and Women,” as Higginson imagined. “If you had none, will you have mine?” The possessive pronoun offers a sense that might have been the kind of salt in the wound that might smart a little at first, but which would ultimately have a salutary effect—one more illustration of just how “quick” writing can be. It is clear she had not changed her mind, but it is understandable why some people mistake her work as capricious. Dickinson’s resistance to typical portraiture reflects her larger struggle against market forces: to evade the culture of literary celebrity in a way that almost every major poet of her century did not. This struggle is based in the poet’s wish to “reduce no Human Spirit / To Disgrace of Price” (c. late 1863, Fasc.37/788). Analogous to the established genre of painting, Dickinson’s self-portrait preserves precisely what no daguerreotype ever can: living thought. In 1862 it was still easy for a writer to make explicit the age-old belief in the superiority of words to preserve that part of us we should not willingly lose, a belief which had been put into practice by Calvinists in Europe years before and which Milton voices in *Eikonoklastes* (1649) in the phrase “Image-doting rabble” (1068), who stand opposed to the true faithful. Dickinson’s question “Could you *believe* me - without?” suggests that she wants readers to place their faith in her words rather than in some variation of the “graven image” fit for the age of mechanical reproduction, and which eliminates the life which is her primary aim as a maker in words.

But Higginson remained persistent, giving Dickinson more opportunities to show just how skillfully she could handle words and men:

You told me in one letter, you could not come to see me, “now,”
and I made no answer, not because I had none, but did not think
myself the price that you should come so far -

I do not ask so large a pleasure, lest you might deny me -
(August 1862, L271)

A few years later, when facing a similar encounter, Dickinson answers again: “I must omit Boston. Father prefers so. He likes me to travel with him but objects that I visit” (9 June 1866, L319). Dickinson’s letters to intimate friends at this point generally suggest her father was too distant from the daily affairs of his family to ever stand in her way in this manner, but we might also imagine that in such circumstances such a father might be all the more imposing. My own feeling is that Edward Dickinson is being used as a blocking character in a comedy written by his daughter, who could have found ways to persuade him otherwise if she had really cared to—presuming that he objected to the visit in the first place. This is an example of the phenomenon Dickinson calls “the fleeing of the Biographied”; it is the point at which we are forced to turn away from her life to her works.

◦ 3 ◦

Higginson’s remark that Dickinson “rests content with a first stroke and does not over-refine and prune away afterwards,” made in the opening paragraph of “An Open Portfolio,” is at odds with a remark he makes in its final paragraph: “she yet had an exacting standard of her own, and would wait many days for a word that satisfied” (393). Although Dickinson’s style is patently rough for its time, critics have shown how this roughness functions in the poems (Miller, *Grammar*; Small), and the apparent wildness of Dickinson’s technical resources reflects neither the poet’s carelessness nor her incapacity but a deliberate choice to figure her way of seeing “New Englandly” (c. late 1861, Fasc.11/F256). Dickinson did not prune her works in the way of

Dr. Johnson's "correct and regular writer" whose "garden" is "accurately formed and diligently planted," but only her very earliest writings (most notably, the letters written in her teens) can be called diffuse in any sense. Dickinson's "exacting standard" led her to produce poems of an unprecedented degree of concentration, anticipating the dense, riddled style of Paul Celan, who translated at least ten of her poems (Rosenthal 134).

Dickinson shows no lack of "artistic self-consciousness" about this quality of her works. The most explicit statement comes in a poem that was probably set in motion by the passing of Elizabeth Barrett Browning on 29 June 1861:

This was a Poet -
It is That
Distills amazing sense
From Ordinary Meanings -
And Attar so immense

From the familiar species
That perished by the Door -
We wonder it was not Ourselves
Arrested it - before -

Of Pictures, the Discloser -
The Poet - it is He -
Entitles Us - by Contrast -
To ceaseless Poverty -

Of Portion - so unconscious -
The Robbing - could not harm -
Himself - to Him - a Fortune -
Exterior - to Time -

(c. late 1862, Fasc.21/F446)

Thomas H. Johnson had set the opening tetrameter as a single line: “This was a Poet - It is That” (J448), but Franklin’s lineation is justified by the poem’s manuscript and by its thought.¹ Though Dickinson knows that poems are made of words and must take place in time, she throws off the measures of chronology in the opening two lines to suggest how the poet removes herself from ordinary time. This is implied both in the dropped past tense by the end of the first line and in the uncertain metre of the opening two. The premature appearance of the line ending strengthens the effect of the dash after “Poet,” suggesting that Browning’s life has been prematurely broken off while also arousing the expectation of a simple eulogy. But the speaker turns to take a new line of thought: not of the dead poet but of the supposed person said to be “Exterior - to Time.” As traditional as it was, and still is, untimely, this idea is secreted between the two opening lines, waiting to be disclosed in the present when the poem is read. The fact that the idea depends on a reader to discover proves that Dickinson does not deny the historicity of texts; she obviously only means what she states elsewhere: the poet may have “quaint opinions,” but he treats “Themes” which “concern our mutual mind” (c. 1863, Fasc.25/F569). To apply Emerson’s formulation of God to the poet, we might say that the poet is, not was; that she speaketh, not spake (cf. *EL* 88). But to believe this we cannot simply rest in the opinion that “it *was* not Ourselves” who “Arrested” what others had presumed to be dead or at least less vital. We must presume instead that there is such a thing as “our mutual mind.”

The concentration of Dickinson’s works reflects two notable, and interpenetrating, advances in nineteenth century thought: the historical criticism of the Bible and the study of

¹ In making this judgment, I adopt Domhnall Mitchell’s assumption that Dickinson indicates a new verse line where an “innocuous” word (here, the pronoun “it”) is capitalised at the head of a manuscript row (21-22, 202-4, etc.). I return to the problems of lineating the manuscripts in the first chapter.

geology, including what is now named paleontology. These subjects received special attention in the New England of Dickinson's time, the latter especially in the college town of Amherst, which served as the hub of geological research for the Connecticut Valley (Peel). Two modes of reading scripture are notable in her culture: the first, typological, was the dominant hermeneutic of American Puritans in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Davis), and maintained its importance throughout Dickinson's school days, as evidenced in the writings of Edward Hitchcock, the famous geologist who "believed that truth in every branch of learning would necessarily manifest God's nature and reinforce His will as it had been articulated in the Bible" (Wolff 79), and Mary Lyon, who studied under Hitchcock in her youth and went on to found Mount Holyoke Female Seminary (Green 130ff.), which Dickinson attended for a year. The second mode of biblical interpretation, known as the "Higher Criticism," was concerned with historical criticism of the Bible, emphasising questions of "authorship, date, place of origin, circumstances of composition, and historical credibility" (Grusin 4). Embraced by many liberals in the generation before Dickinson began composing her work, most notably Transcendentalist writers like Emerson, the Higher Criticism convinced such writers "that the truths of the Christian religion were to be understood not literally but symbolically" (Gura 7), thus exposing the challenges such writers had to face to write at all. In an essay on Henry David Thoreau's mythological interpretation, Richard Grusin remarks that the set of beliefs particular to a time "helps to obscure the inessential, accidental, contingent details of ancient texts, so that their skeletal 'necessities' can assume more sublime stature" (113). Though led to such insights by facing the problems raised by the historical mode of criticism, Thoreau ultimately values an approach which resembles the typological mode in many ways. The image of "skeletal 'necessities'" recalls the "Themes" Dickinson takes to "concern our mutual mind"—a mutuality

achieved by obscuring the inessential, accidental, contingent facts of our lives so that we might focus on the essential, necessary, universal topics that unite us. The image also implies how the study of fossils can influence thinking about language.

Emerson famously remarks that “Language is fossil poetry,” adding that “though the origin of most of our words is forgotten, each word was at first a stroke of genius, and obtained currency, because for the moment it symbolized the world to the first speaker and to the hearer” (*EL* 457). Like “some rare tenant of the mold” which has been returned to life in the mind of the comparative anatomist, words which “have long ceased to remind us of their poetic origin” can be revived: “Genius is the activity which repairs the decays of things, whether wholly or partly of a material and finite kind” (*EL* 457). By the process of poetic distillation Dickinson makes a kind of “fossil poetry” which escapes time in the same way that a being preserved in stone can be said to do so. Emerson later adds: “An imaginative book renders us much more service at first, by stimulating us through its tropes, than afterward, when we arrive at the precise sense of the author” (*EL* 462). Dickinson’s writing is not without the “architectural dimension” required “to direct the reader’s activity within its space,” but its concentration makes for an exquisite medium for her thought, which is so concerned with the primary aspects of life. Omitting what is inessential from her utterance, Dickinson directs the reader not to reflect upon an irrecoverable past but rather to experience the states of being which remain accessible in the present.

Comparing Dickinson to Thoreau, Sewall asserts that “she had certain private affairs to transact that were more important to her” than the ordinary worldly ones (*Life* 11). The comparison between these two New England contemporaries is appropriate in light of a reminiscence by a family member that “Thoreau was naturally one of her favorite authors” (in

Buckingham 331), but it is also pertinent in several ways. At the opening of *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* (1854), Thoreau writes:

When I wrote the following pages, or rather the bulk of them, I lived alone, in the woods, a mile away from any neighbor, in a house which I had built myself, on the shore of Walden Pond in Concord, Massachusetts, and earned my living by the labor of my hands only. I lived there two years and two months. At present I am a sojourner in civilized life again. (9)

Later on, Thoreau explains what caused him to renounce “civilized life” in the first place:

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. (83)

Lawrence Buell’s observation that, for Thoreau, “the values of civilization are inherently problematic and the state of nature a standard against which to measure them” (320), applies also to Dickinson. Although she kept busy with the domestic chores of her household, Dickinson was never put in a position to earn her keep, which opened up the opportunity to renounce the town life of Amherst for the majority of her adulthood. But while Dickinson’s sex and social class provide two obvious reasons why she never took up an abode in the woods, her family hermitage in Amherst provided enough opportunities to surround herself in the world of nature, taking delight in what Emerson describes in *Nature* (1836): “The greatest delight which the fields and woods minister, is the suggestion of an occult relation between man and the vegetable” (13).

Midway through a fascicle she bound about spring 1863, Dickinson writes:

Some - Work for Immortality -
The Chiefest part, for Time -

(1862; Fr.536A, F28.12)

Dickinson's biography may supply important clues to the life of her poems, but if we want to understand the life of this poet, it is essential to recognise that she belongs to the first of these two labour forces, and that the life of those who "Work for Immortality" takes its centre in her words. The primary sense of "Immortality" for Dickinson is not a thing to be enjoyed after death but the happiest state of life on earth.

Eternity - it was - before
Eternity was due -

(c. summer 1863, Fasc.25/F573)

This is the poet's primary subject. Delineated in her works so as to be reanimated by a reader at some time in the future, this essential state of life makes an author live on in her works.

"Immortality" signifies the content of the poetry Dickinson sought to create: the kind that not only renders its maker an immortal but also offers its reader the experience of "Immortality" for a time, or the guidance to share the poet's visionary eye. Just as she reanimates the words of her native tongue, Dickinson depends upon a reader to reanimate her own, the doing of which at once recovers the state of earthly bliss and proves true the poet's "claim to immortality" (LYC 403). All texts require such efforts to live, but the heavy concentration of Dickinson's poems compels us to do a lot of hard work. Although Dickinson's themes are notably simple, her style is neither plain nor direct but compels readers to "Work for Immortality," as she did.

◦ 4 ◦

The principle of organic form lies at the heart of Dickinson's poetic project and helps to account for the frequent difficulty of her writing. In an essay on American criticism for the period of 1840-70, Richard H. Fogle observes that the idea of organic form "could be inhaled from the

atmosphere” in the 1840s, which was still some years before Dickinson’s poetic lungs had fully formed (83). The idea is expressed throughout Emerson’s works, and is expressed succinctly in his essay on the poet, who seeks to reveal “a thought so passionate and alive, that, like the spirit of a plant or an animal, it has an architecture of its own, and adorns nature with a new thing” (*EL* 450). Inseparable from notions of originality, the idea remained doctrinal in the poetic culture of Dickinson’s day, and it could be invoked to excuse a poet whose thought took nonconventional forms.

The idea of organic form takes many different shapes in American literature in the years up to the war, but, as with doctrines generally, the idea seems to be echoed much more often than it is understood. Seven months before T.W. Higginson would accept the offer for the colonelcy of the First South Carolina Volunteers from Brigadier General Rufus Saxton, he published his “Letter to a Young Contributor” in the *Atlantic Monthly*. There he commands contributors: “Charge your style with life” (404), and describes the appearance and effect of a living style:

Human language may be polite and powerless in itself, uplifted with difficulty into expression by the high thoughts it utters, or it may in itself become so saturated with warm life and delicious association that every sentence shall palpitate and thrill with the mere fascination of the syllables. (403)

Higginson here accommodates the idea to accord with the plain and direct style of writing he not only advocates but also practices in his “Letter.” Although Higginson encourages writers to “clothe and reclothe your grand conceptions twenty times, until you find some phrase that with its grandeur shall be lucid also,” he suggests that when a writer

becomes after all incomprehensible, we can try to believe that it is only that inevitable obscurity of vast thought which Coleridge said was a compliment to the reader. (404)

Higginson shows a lesser attempt to believe this in “Emily Dickinson’s Letters” (*AM*, October 1891), where he repeats the idea with the suggestion of a smirk: “Often, she was obscure and sometimes inscrutable; and though obscurity is sometimes, in Coleridge’s phrase, a compliment to the reader, yet it is never safe to press this compliment too hard” (451). That a certain kind of obscurity might be thought of as “a compliment to the reader” suggests a distinction between two kinds of obscurity. The first kind is either impenetrable to sense or “suggestive” of several irreconcilable senses. The second kind is ultimately penetrable, and represents merely some degree of deviation from ordinary usage. Although it is widely mistaken for the first kind, Dickinson’s obscurity is usually of the second kind. The popular writer Helen Hunt Jackson remarks to the poet in a letter: “This morning I have read over again the last verses you sent me: I find them more clear than I thought they were. Part of the dimness must have been in me” (October 1876, L476c). The word “part” shows Jackson conceding her own limitations as a reader while also suggesting that Dickinson herself could work harder to meet the reader halfway. In the next two sentences, Jackson goes on to remark: “Yet I have others which I like better. I like your simplest and [most direct] lines best” (part of the manuscript has been cut away, and the brackets represent Johnson’s conjecture). The suggestion that Dickinson’s obscurity is an artistic shortcoming merely shows a failure to understand the function of organic form. As Fogle notes: “Form and idea justify each other, bear each other up. Break this union, destroy this balance, and you get unformed thought or sterile technique, didacticism or art for art’s sake, a cloddish realism or an empty elegance” (86). Dickinson herself offers an indirect explanation for obscurity in the poem opening “We grow accustomed to the Dark” (c. 1862; Fascicle 15/F428), which concludes:

The Bravest - grope a little -

And sometimes hit a Tree
Directly in the Forehead -
But as they learn to see -

Either the Darkness alters -
Or something in the sight
Adjusts itself to Midnight -
And Life steps almost straight.

Considered in light of her “dark” style, the poem (which is notably lucid in expression) implies that only “The Bravest”—who are not afraid to “grope a little” in the dark—“learn to see.”

Dickinson’s style reflects her conception of life as being in the dark.

Higginson’s opinion that Dickinson should lighten up her style seems to have remained pretty constant. The topic of “darkness” comes up several times in the early letters. In the fourth letter she writes,

You said ‘Dark.’ I know the Butterfly - and the Lizard - and the
Orchis -
Are not those *your* Countrymen? (July 1862, L268)

Dickinson is stating that she uses a style based on natural symbols, in the same manner as Emerson, who advocates the approach in *Nature* (1836). This is the basis for her modest claim to originality in her August letter: “I ... never consciously touch a paint, mixed by another person” (L271), where the addition of the word “consciously” itself shows awareness of her own limitations. Her own palette was of words, and her habit of using words in original and striking combinations means that their meanings will often seem “Dark” to those unprepared to look past the surface roughness to the symbolic import of her words.

Whether or not Dickinson really believed, from reading Higginson's essays in the *Atlantic*, that he understood the use of natural symbols as she did, it seems that he did not take much sense from her writings. In the next letter she writes: "You say I confess the little mistake, and omit the large - Because I can see Orthography - but the Ignorance out of sight - is my Preceptor's charge" (August 1862, L271), suggesting a few paragraphs later that her "large" mistake is obscurity itself, or what she periphrastically names "the Ignorance out of sight":

You say "Beyond your knowledge." You would not jest with me,
because I believe you - but Preceptor - you cannot mean it? All
men say "What" to me, but I thought it a fashion -

Dickinson assumes that Higginson has a working knowledge of the language of symbolism, but his own bafflement suggests that he did not recognise how she uses symbols.

Dickinson's remark to Higginson that he asks great questions "accidentally" provides a clue to a fundamental difference in the approach of both writers. Whereas Dickinson deliberately submits to the inherent powers of language, Higginson believes language is a power to be controlled by the will. In Dickinson's mind, this prevented Higginson from achieving true vitality in his writings. It confined him to the tether of "Much Sense." Dickinson's fifth letter to Higginson reflects this difference clearly.

I had no Monarch in my life, and cannot rule myself, and when I
try to organize - my little Force explodes - and leaves me bare and
charred -
I think you called me "Wayward." Will you help me improve?
I suppose the pride that stops the Breath, in the Core of the Woods,
is not of Ourselves -

Webster defines “wayward” as “froward; peevish; perverse; liking his own way” (*ADEL*). Placing this word in the paragraph between the two others provides an alternative between “cannot rule myself” and “is not of Ourselves.” In the middle of these alternatives, the question “Will you help me improve?” (which is clearly ironic in the context of the correspondence as a whole) implies that Higginson’s view, though conventional, is far more “wayward” than hers, being based in will; in contrast, her art aims to represent

The Moments of Dominion
That happen on the Soul

(c. second half of 1863; Fasc.32/F696),

the word “Dominion” being defined by Webster as “sovereign or supreme authority; the power of governing and controlling” (sense 1)—a sense that relates closely to Dickinson’s claim to Higginson. The figure of “the Core of the Woods” represents the heart of Dickinson’s poetic project; it stands for the source of her poems. She finds life in “the Woods,” a symbol of what is beyond the wilful human mind.

This fact allows us to explain Dickinson’s claim in the first paragraph, which Porter cites to support his diagnosis of the poet’s supposed incoherence, and from which Richard Chase extracts the confession that “she was incapable of systematic abstract thought, just as she was incapable of organizing a closely knit poem of any but the shortest length” (131). If this means only that Dickinson’s genius was manifest in lyric poems rather than philosophical treatises and that her style is concentrated rather than diffuse, let us stop with that. If her claim means what Chase makes of it, it proves only that she failed badly on this point as a critic, as he did. Judy Jo Small wisely rejects these interpretations, asserting that the claim “blends a modesty calculated to appeal to a preceptor with the sly brag of a young genius claiming volcanic powers of inspiration” (2). The claim exhibits a remarkable balance between the dictates of convention and

those of ego; it is the right thing to say in the situation and excessively bold. But while this interpretation of the passage is much better than those offered by Chase and Porter it is focused on Dickinson's personal motives and only hints at what the poet claims about her art. Writing as "the Representative of the Verse," Dickinson claims "volcanic powers of inspiration" for her works, not for herself.

Once we recognise the principle of organic form in Dickinson's work, the word "organize" stands out in her claim to Higginson, implying as it does the mechanical force used by those "of poetical talents, or of industry and skill in metre" who Emerson opposes to "the true poet" (*EL* 450). To impose order necessarily implies the preexistence of that order, which requires one to commit the fallacy of mechanical form. The "little Force" that animates Dickinson's poetry will not be manipulated; when she tries to do so the power self-destructs in her hands, rendering her a living burnt offering for making the attempt. Dickinson's art springs from a source beyond the self; she hints at this when she says, "I suppose the pride that stops the Breath, in the Core of the Woods, is not of Ourselves," a sentence which obviously denies the ordinary sense of "pride" as "inordinate self-esteem" (*ADEL*, sense 1) to demand the metaphorical sense of "elevation; loftiness" (*ADEL*, sense 4). This kind of pride is central to Dickinson's poetic project. It is the source of her faith in darkness, or what she periphrastically renames "the Ignorance out of sight" and refers to as Higginson's "charge." Dickinson's fourth letter to Higginson begins by renewing her request for his instruction, but she then declares her poetic and suggests that it is at odds with external leading:

Perhaps you smile at me. I could not stop for that - My Business is
Circumference - An ignorance, not of Customs, but if caught with
the Dawn - or the Sunset see me - Myself the only Kangaroo

among the Beauty, Sir, if you please, it afflicts me, and I thought
that instruction would take it away. (July 1862, L268)

Repeated twice in the last sentence, the referent of “it” is not certain, but it presumably refers back to “An ignorance,” which itself is related by rhyme (*-nce*) to “Circumference.” The “Business” of “Circumference” took her outside the regular orbit of “Customs” (cf. “Much Sense”) which makes her appear as a “Kangaroo,” an image not only strange but opposed to “the Beauty,” Dickinson’s term for polished, conventional art. The image of “the only Kangaroo among the Beauty” stands for the principle of vitality against mere formalism.

The notion that a poem might be “alive” has been rejected in recent criticism, but those who have been through poems and felt quickened by the encounter might agree that no stricter term can prove adequate to explain the sense of their object. Like any term of criticism, the notion requires that we handle it carefully; because it is slippery, we must be nimble. All writing that depends on the principle of organic form demands a certain faith in the possibility of a metaphorical identity between writing and biology, and in the reader’s openness to being led by the form itself, rather than by some pre-established point of view or idea he or she seeks to find in the text, which implies rather the metaphor of hunting. Although the turn to ideologically motivated forms of criticism in the previous generation led to many insights, such an approach yields very little of the forms of power Dickinson’s writings offer.

In her book length response to the “wholesale indictments of American imaginative power” that mark the Americanist criticism of the eighties and nineties, Elisa New finds Dickinson using the imagination “as a means of turning toward the animals” and also “as a means of living more fully ‘with’ the animals” (*Line’s Eye* 7, 107). This view informs the present study throughout, but I develop it in two directions. First, New assumes that it applies only to the

works of Dickinson's "last years" (7)—as if maturity led the poet to turn from "vision" to "sight," terms New employs in her study to contrast the turn from idealism to realism. Although this distinction has much conceptual value, I am not convinced it applies so broadly to Dickinson's work. It does little to account for the works of Dickinson's early years, which constitute the bulk of her corpus. With an eye on Dickinson's complete works, I have been more concerned to discover the common thread which animates both kinds of poem New identifies. Doing so, I have found it necessary to assume the usefulness of imaginative power more generally, and to consider how Dickinson's writings contribute not only to the American but also to the English language tradition. Second, while New attends to what Dickinson calls "Nature's People" (c. late 1865, Set 6c/F1096B), I consider Dickinson's poetic relation to the places, things, and beings of the earth more generally. Besides the many instances of such "People" in her work ("the Butterfly - and the Lizard" and the poet's Newfoundland dog, Carlo), figures of nature in Dickinson's imagination include vegetable forms of life ("the Orchis"), the elements (especially the wind and the rain), and places like her orchard, the hills, and the woods. All of these figures admit literal readings, but for me these are chiefly valuable for literary study as symbols.

The woods stands for Dickinson's organicism generally, but it carries a particular charge in a passage from Dickinson's fifth letter to Higginson, which is the closest the poet ever comes to offering a defence of her art:

When much in the Woods as a little Girl, I was told that the Snake
would bite me, that I might pick a poisonous flower, or Goblins
kidnap me, but I went along and met no one but Angels, who were
far shy of me, than I could be of them, so I hav'nt that confidence
in fraud which many exercise.

Though the image of the snake helps to suggest the biblical tree of the knowledge of good and evil, “the Woods” here provides an analogue to the tree of life, a symbol of Edenic life more generally. The woods is Dickinson’s symbol of the world as it is, rather than as it is made to seem by convention; and it is not only not threatening to her but positively enchanting. This view is striking in contrast to conventional representations of the woods as dark and sinister.

Dickinson refers to this view as what she “was told.” In a letter to her cousins Louisa and Frances Norcross, the poet observes: “It is true that the unknown is the largest need of the intellect, though for it, no one thinks to thank God” (August 1876, L471). Although she does not always give much credit to the Deity considered in other contexts, Dickinson preserves a sense of the profound mysteriousness of life in her poetry. A symbol of experience off the beaten paths of tradition, the woods represents this mystery to her mind: dark but also peaceful, it is an earthly place of great serenity in Dickinson’s imagination. The negative phrasing of the final clause shows a typical way Dickinson effaces herself for a higher purpose—here, to suggest awareness that others might think she lacks sophistication or experience in the normal sense of these words. It is a deft way to balance her claim to have “met no one but Angels.” Passing beyond received ideas about the woods, Dickinson loses “confidence in fraud” to gain trust in the world, or rather in the world that includes the messengers of God.

In the opening line of the poem that fronts Emerson’s essay on “The Poet” (1844), the phrase “wildly wise” echoes the customary “worldly wise,” offering a suggestion that the more transcendently-minded poet is not particularly prudent and practical, nor concerned with “the world” in its reduced sense as the goings-on in the lives of women and men. Substituting “wildly” for the ordinary “worldly,” Emerson’s phrase carries the suggestion of being at home in the wider world that includes the human world but is not reduced to it. Neither prudent nor

practical in the ordinary sense, Dickinson is not far from Emerson's poet in this way. As she states her profession as a poet:

I dwell in Possibility -
A fairer House than Prose -
More numerous of Windows -
Superior - for Doors -

Of Chambers as the Cedars -
Impregnable of eye -
And for an everlasting Roof
The Gambrels of the Sky -

Of Visitors - the fairest -
For Occupation - This -
The spreading wide my narrow Hands
To gather Paradise -

(c. late 1862, Fasc.22/F466)

Emerson's "wildly wise"—to which the idiomatic echo offers an ironic counter point—helps to recall the limitations of poetic wisdom, which is not worldly in the ordinary sense. Dickinson's "Possibility" admits no restriction, and her dream of poetry would be a nightmare to a person with agoraphobia.

Dickinson's imagination is unbridled, her thought is hard to follow, and she is not very forgiving of dimness on the reader's part. The letter to Higginson already quoted implies a recognition of this last point, and provides a clue to her poetic project:

You say "Beyond your knowledge." You would not jest with me,
because I believe you - but Preceptor - you cannot mean it? All
men say "What" to me, but I thought it a fashion -
When much in the Woods as a little Girl, I was told that the Snake
would bite me, that I might pick a poisonous flower, or Goblins
kidnap me, but I went along and met no one but Angels, who were

far shy of me, than I could be of them, so I hav'nt that
confidence in fraud which many exercise.
I shall observe your precept - though I dont understand it, always.

Coming before and after the paragraph on the woods she was told to fear but honours instead, “your knowledge” and “your precept” imply the view that Higginson’s instruction would keep her out of the woods and cut off the source of her poetry. The ambiguity of “I shall *observe* your precept” allows Dickinson to maintain the modesty conventionally expected of women without having to forsake either her art or her correspondence with the well-known man of letters and other liberal causes. Dickinson undoubtedly learned a lot from her correspondence with Higginson, but her references to him as “Preceptor” and to herself as his “Scholar” should be taken in the same spirit as her question “Will you help me improve?”

◦ 5 ◦

That Dickinson apparently never sought to publish her works is often taken to mean that she thought print inadequate as a medium for her writings, or else that her poems were private utterances not intended for others’ eyes. The latter view has been prevalent ever since Higginson asserted confidently in the preface to *Poems* (1890) that Dickinson’s writings “belong emphatically to what Emerson long since called ‘the Poetry of the Portfolio,’—something produced absolutely without the thought of publication, and solely by way of expression of the writer’s own mind” (iii). “Emphatically,” “absolutely,” “solely”—such words need no italics, but they are too emphatic to inspire confidence that they are also correct. Cristanne Miller’s view that “during the early 1860s Dickinson entertained the idea of publication, albeit ambivalently” (*Reading* 176) seems to me far more plausible. Higginson’s advice that Dickinson “delay ‘to

publish” (7 June 1862, L265) reflects his doubt that her writings would stand up by themselves. Though he would ultimately agree to co-edit a volume of poems by Dickinson, Higginson did so hesitantly, and never truly recognised her achievement. Even when the volume proved a popular success, Higginson never defended Dickinson’s peculiarities as a writer, and after a profitable five year run in which three volumes of her poems and two volumes of her letters were published, Higginson published a book of essays on his famous *Contemporaries* (1899), in which he mentions Dickinson’s name only once, in an essay on the Amherst-born writer once widely known as “H.H.”: “The poetry of Mrs. Jackson unquestionably takes rank above that of any American woman, and its only rival would be found, curiously enough, in that of her early schoolmate, Emily Dickinson” (162). This opinion reminds us of how conventional Higginson was in his literary judgment, and how mistaken. Curiously enough, Jackson is now remembered chiefly as an early schoolmate of Dickinson. Jackson was plainly one of Higginson’s contemporaries. At the height of her celebrity, Jackson writes to the immortal poet from Colorado Springs:

It is a cruel wrong to your “day & generation” that you will not give them light. - If such a thing should happen as that I should outlive you, I wish you would make me your literary legatee & executor. Surely, after you are what is called “dead,” you will be willing that the poor ghosts you have left behind, should be cheered and pleased by your verses, will you not? - You ought to be. - I do not think we have a right to withhold from the world a word or a thought any more than a deed, which might help a single soul. (September 5, 1884, L937a)

Dickinson does not seem to have been susceptible to this type of persuasion. As it happened, Jackson did not “outlive” Dickinson to be her literary executor, and the poet would not likely have ever consented to the possibility. Dickinson is reported to have exclaimed to Jackson at one point: “How can you ... Print a piece of your soul!” (AB 166, quoting Mabel Loomis Todd’s

journal for October 18, 1891). Dickinson reluctantly grants that “Poverty may be justifying / For so foul a thing” as publication (c. late 1863, Fasc.37/F788), and it is hard not to think such reluctance relates to her family’s financial security. Jackson herself “was not obliged to write out of financial necessity,” but seems to have written to help others (Phillips 94)—a moral purpose that is manifest less directly in Dickinson, a subject I will return to below in the final section.

Yet Higginson’s view has proven peculiarly adhesive. Among the critics who believe that Dickinson not only wished to remain without publication in her lifetime but wished to do so in perpetuity, the poet Susan Howe offers the most extreme view, suggesting in her influential *The Birth-mark* (1993) that Dickinson “may have chosen to enter the space of silence, a space where power is no longer an issue, gender is no longer an issue, voice is no longer an issue, where the idea of a printed book appears as a trap” (170).² Though this negative space sounds intriguing, Howe never quotes any positive statement from Dickinson to support her idea of the “printed book ... as a trap,” and evidence to the contrary is easy to obtain. In an early poem, “Unto my Books - so good to turn” (1862; F512), Dickinson describes books as “Bells - within,” where the object of the preposition is omitted, suggesting both the author and the reader. In a late poem, “He ate and drank the precious Words” (1882; F1593), she presents the book as a container of a sacrament, periphrastically referring to it as a “Bequest of Wings,” an image quite opposite to Howe’s “trap.” Of course, a book only ever contains the letter of the thought; its spirit must be sought by an avid reader. Appearing to involve a macaronic pun which previous writers have made by ignoring the syllable length of “*liber*, free” (to make *liber* “book”), and which lexicographers like Webster have facilitated by omitting the macron in the word, the poem

² Howe first makes her argument in “These Flames and Generosities of the Heart,” which appears in *Sulfur* 27 (Spring 1991).

concludes: “this ... / Was but a Book - What Liberty / A loosened Spirit brings.”³ A printed book is alive with freedom to the extent that it preserves “A loosened Spirit” made flesh through a vital reading. I find no evidence to suggest that Dickinson thought the book itself unfit as a container of the “Possibility” she celebrates, and which critics often take as a metonym for the poetry she aspires to write.

More recently, in *Dickinson’s Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading* (2005), Virginia Jackson foregrounds the variety of Dickinson’s corpus—which includes poems, letters, verses, drafts and fragments in prose and verse, and also non-literary things like flowers and dead crickets, which accompanied verses the poet sent to friends—in order to argue that “the framing of Dickinson’s writing as a set of lyrics is not only an ongoing collective, historical process, but also a mistake” (235). Jackson makes a good case for recognising the extra-literary life of some of Dickinson’s writings—both the objects that she made to accompany her words and the fact that some of her “poems” appear to be intended for a specific audience of the past. I agree that we should attend to this variety, but I think it should inform rather than determine our reading of Dickinson’s poetry. Pushed to the foreground of inquiry, such attention cancels that part of Dickinson which survives intact and which modern methods of reading (though undoubtedly limited, as Jackson partially shows) do very well to explain. Like Howe’s Dickinson, Jackson’s bears a resemblance to Higginson’s poet who never aspires to publication, in whom there may be “wonderful strokes and felicities, and yet an incomplete and unsatisfactory whole”—a topic we

³ Though he includes macrons elsewhere, Webster himself prints both words as “liber” (cf. his etymologies for “liberal” and “library”), noting in the etymology of “libel” that “*liber*, a book, and *liber*, free, are the same word” (*ADEL*). Webster’s view is apparently based on the radical sense he gives for *liber*: “stripping, separating”—i.e. *liberating*—“bark” from trees (to make books). The *OED* does not draw this imaginative connection. For an early poem offering an image of the book as a “Holiday” which “excludes the night” and makes it “Bells - within,” see “Unto my Books - so good to turn -” (about spring 1863; Fascicle 24; F512).

will return to in Chapter 4. Surely some of Dickinson's writings were not intended for publication, as some may in fact be "dependent on their artifactual contexts" (13), but modern methods of close analysis show quite well that the better part of the corpus is rather independent of such contexts.

Dickinson left her writings without a will at her death, but the writings themselves contain many clues that she expected they might ultimately reach print. Despite Higginson's conviction that Dickinson's poems were "produced absolutely without the thought of publication," he and Todd set the following poem as an epigraph to the selection:

This is my letter to the World
That never wrote to Me -
The simple News that Nature told -
With tender Majesty

Her Message is committed
To Hands I cannot see -
For love of Her - Sweet - countrymen -
Judge tenderly - of Me

(c. spring 1863, Fasc.24/F519)

This is only the most direct of Dickinson's addresses to a reader whom she "cannot see."

Recalling her first letter to Higginson, in early April 1859 Dickinson writes to Bowles, who by then was established as an editor and author: "I have but two acquaintance, the 'Quick and the Dead' - and would like more" (L205), evidently with a mind on an audience to come. In her exchange with Susan Dickinson about "Safe in their Alabaster Chambers," the poet expresses thanks for the "praise" her sister-in-law gives, then adds: "Could I make you and Austin proud - sometime - a great way off - 'twould give me taller feet" (L238). The poet did precisely this when her poems were published posthumously thirty years later.

Higginson seems to have been too caught up in affairs of his age to make much of Dickinson, but even he recognised how writers might find their age too limited for the production of their art: “Remember how many great writers have created the taste by which they were enjoyed, and do not be in a hurry” (LYC 407). Dickinson alludes to this advice in the conclusion of a letter she sent in early 1866 (L316), when she makes it quite clear that she aspires beyond her own day.

I will be patient - constant, never reject your knife and should my
my slowness goad you, you knew before myself that
 Except the smaller size
 No lives are round -
 These - hurry to a sphere
 And show and end -

 The larger - slower grow
 And later hang -
 The Summers of Hesperides
 Are long.
 Dickinson

Here the “lives” of the poets are figured as the golden apples from the Hellenic analogue to Eden, the immortal taste of which abolishes death in life, and which hangs on for all time—or for a “long” one. The “lives” that “hurry to a sphere”—i.e. the people who anxiously settle for a predetermined form of employment, in which activities are calculated in advance (lawyer, parent, professional writer, professor, etc.)—are set against the “lives” that “later hang,” or enjoy remarkable longevity through the ages, and “slower grow,” or remain free to develop at their own pace (child, poet, dreamer, professional student, etc.). In a draft of the poem Dickinson writes:

Hugest of Core
Present the awkward Rind -
Yield Groups of Ones -
No Cluster - ye shall find -

But far after Frost -
And Indian Summer Noon -
Ships - offer these -
As West - Indian -

(c. summer 1863, Fasc.26/F606A)

The phrase “awkward Rind” reminds us of “the only Kangaroo among the Beauty.” The poem further explains why Dickinson set life above lucidity in these matters. Dickinson’s goal is growth; her style takes the verbal form in which she found it.

“Dickinson.” Though the signature does not now appear peculiar, it does if we compare it to the signatures accompanying the poet’s letters to intimates in the surrounding years, all of which she signs “Emily.” After this point, Dickinson almost always signs only her surname to her letters to Higginson, having graduated from “E. Dickinson” and “Your Scholar,” signatures she uses previously. Dickinson knew from reading the *Atlantic* that only poets dead or widely-known were referred to only by their family name (not preceded by a title). “Tennyson,” “Browning,” and “Emerson” all occur in the same years that “Walt. Whitman” and “Mr. Whitman” appear (1857-60). This convention of English serves to emphasise the fact that, even with the greatest intimacy, a reader is never on a first-name basis with an author; and to remind us that, however large they may prove to be, even “Groups of Ones” never grow alone. The signature itself suggests Dickinson’s wish to bring honours upon her surname (“sometime - a great way off”) just like its men, all of whom were distinguished members of their community. It also shows forth the “abrupt, exalted” side of the New England woman, suggesting a wish to be judged among the dominant tradition of poets rather than only against other female writers, as

Higginson does. Whatever it means exactly, Dickinson's signature to her 1866 letter reminds us of the importance of family connections for the development of a poet. As the daughter of an affluent lawyer, Dickinson enjoyed the double privilege of not having to rush to "a sphere" and not having to write to a preconceived taste. "Independence," Johnson tells us, secured Alexander Pope "from drudging at a task, and labouring upon a barren topick," so that "when he could produce nothing new, he was at liberty to be silent" (916). The fact of being a Dickinson enabled the poet to "grow" according to her own season. Very few American poets have enjoyed such independence.

Writing shortly after the turn of the twentieth century, Rainer Maria Rilke describes fame in *The Notebook of Malte Laurids Brigge* as "that public destruction of one in the process of becoming, into whose building-ground the mob breaks, displacing his stones" (76). But the culture of celebrity is now only more advanced than it was in the nineteenth century, and it is easy to trace Rilke's thought backwards to Goethe—who Higginson paraphrases as saying, "if a person once does a good thing, society forms a league to prevent his doing another" (LYC 408)—and forwards to Emerson, who in "Self-Reliance" (1841) warns of the dangers a person faces after having once "acted or spoken with éclat," whereafter he becomes "a committed person, watched by the sympathy or the hatred of hundreds, whose affections must now enter into his account" (EL 261). "Imprisoned" is one of several words Webster uses to define "committed" (ADEL). Higginson adds to this dialogue in his "Letter," noting just before he paraphrases Goethe:

The greatest man has passed his zenith, when he once begins to cheapen his style of work and sink into a bookmaker: after that, though the newspapers may never hint at it, nor his admirers own it, the decline of his career is begun. Yet the author is not alone to blame for this, but also the world which first tempts and then reproves him. (408)

Higginson's article was fresh in Dickinson's mind when she first wrote to him. Throughout her letters and poems, Dickinson shows an acute awareness of the metaphorical death that can occur to us in life, and surely her immersion in the literary culture of her times would have made her aware also that writers sometimes grow weak from renown.

Of the fame that outlasts an age, Dickinson observes: "To earn it by disdaining it / Is Fame's consummate Fee" (c. 1877, F1445). However unlikely in fact, the idea that Keats had died at the hand of a "deaf and viperous murderer" (to use Shelley's words for the *Quarterly* critic of *Endymion*) is rehearsed in Higginson's article (LYC 407), and we can use it to represent the extreme end of a spectrum of literary life and death, where "The Martyr Poets" (c. second half of 1863; Fasc.30/F665) exist on one side, representing those who lived and died for their art, and the Mere Versifiers, who represented only the faded conventions of a past art, lie still on the other. In the second stanza of "I'm Nobody! Who are you?" (c. late 1861, F260), Dickinson asserts:

How dreary - to be - Somebody!
How public - like a Frog -
To tell one's name - the livelong June -
To an admiring Bog!

Being "Somebody" is "dreary." Webster's definition of the adjective involves terrible meanings for a poet aspiring to immortality:

1. Dismal; gloomy; as, a *dreary* waste; *dreary* shades. This word implies both solitude and gloom.
2. Sorrowful; distressing; as, *dreary* shrieks. – Spenser.

The writer praised as “Somebody” in her day receives not a life in aftertimes but the distressing “solitude and gloom” of death. The phrase that concludes the poem, “admiring Bog,” suggests a sense of the kind of audience Dickinson feared, the punning “*admiring*” doubling the insult. Although Dickinson surely did not believe there is a necessary relation between publishing and perishing, her desire to “go / White unto the White Creator” (F788) suggests a motive more spiritual than social. But this motive applies only to the historical person, not the poet implied in the works, and publication after death cannot tarnish the immortal part of her.

The key to Dickinson’s spiritual life lay in renunciation, a word I will discuss in depth in Chapter 6, but which Emerson’s address in “The Poet” foretells:

O poet! ... Thou shalt leave the world, and know the muse only. ... God wills also that thou abdicate a manifold and duplex life, and that thou be content that others speak for thee. ... The world is full of renunciations and apprenticeships, and this is thine: thou must pass for a fool and a churl for a long season. ... And this is the reward: that the ideal shall be real to thee, and the impressions of the actual world shall fall like summer rain, copious, but not troublesome, to thy invulnerable essence. (*EL* 467)

The same *quid pro quo* appears in an early poem in which Dickinson asserts:

A little bread, a crust - a crumb,
A little trust, a Demijohn -
Can keep the soul alive -
Not portly, mind!
But breathing - warm -
Conscious, as old Napoleon
The night before the crown!

The poem’s second stanza opens “A modest lot, a fame petite,” both of which also “keep the soul alive”—i.e. “breathing - warm” and “*Conscious*.” The poem concludes: “Who asketh more /

Must seek the neighboring life!” (c. second half of 1860, F135), the implication being that a fame *grande* would reduce the life of the soul on earth.

The explanation offered by William Dean Howells in an early review of *Poems* (1890), stands in direct contrast to Higginson’s, and stands up far better when judged only from the internal evidence of Dickinson’s corpus:

There is no hint of what turned her life in upon itself, and probably this was its natural evolution, or involution, from tendencies inherent in the New England, or the Puritan, spirit. ... She never intended or allowed anything ... from her pen to be printed in her lifetime; but it was evident that she wished her poetry finally to meet the eyes of that world which she had herself always shrunk from. She could not have made such poetry without knowing its rarity, its singular worth; and no doubt it was a radiant happiness in the twilight of her hidden, silent life. (318)

Dickinson’s life-work has a principally spiritual motive. Although this motive was almost certainly inflected by the hope of ultimate publication, the work itself is cause enough for “radiant happiness.”

◦ 6 ◦

If we take Dickinson’s poems and letters to point at her person, however obliquely, her main “life goal” was apparently to make immortal words and to find other modes of enjoying a fuller life on earth. She worked hardest in her younger years, but in the surviving poems and letters from her early twenties to her death at fifty-five Dickinson wrought almost nothing but poetry. Although the distinction between the poet implied in the writings and the historical person who wrote them can lead to excesses among critics, Dickinson herself observes the distinction in her letters to Higginson, associating her literary life with spiritual growth, despite that such growth

was presumably transferrable to her person as well. In her fourth letter to Higginson she remarks that he must “have much business, beside the growth of me,” going on in the next paragraph to draw the distinction between “myself, as the Representative of the Verse” and “me,” a juxtaposition which suggests that the growth of the person and the growth of the poet, though distinct, support each other. Surely when Dickinson refers to her own “growth”—a word vague in its multifaceted concreteness—she speaks for both. Ever since the Age of Sensibility, “growth” has been viewed as a legitimate project for a poet, and Dickinson is not exceptional among nineteenth century poets in making it her own. Her poetic creed is expressed very simply in a poem she made in her early thirties:

Each Life converges to some Centre -
Expressed - or still -
Exists in every Human Nature
A Goal -

Admitted scarcely to itself - it may be -
Too fair
For Credibility's temerity
To dare -

Adored with caution - as a Brittle Heaven -
To reach
Were hopeless, as the Rainbow's Raiment
To touch -

Yet persevered toward - surer - for the Distance -
How high -
Unto the Saints' slow diligence -
The Sky -

Ungained - it may be - in a Life's low Venture -
But then -
Eternity enable the endeavoring

Again.

(c. second half of 1863; Fasc.35/F724)

Having distanced herself from the literary marketplace throughout her life, Dickinson is arguably the most determined of all nineteenth century poets in quest of what she variously calls “Soul,” “Mind,” and “Goal,” and which serves as the “Centre” to her “Circumference.” Her “Business is Circumference,” or the expansion of consciousness in experience.

Her main goal as a poet being to grow, Dickinson naturally avoided publication. She knew enough from her professional literary correspondents to perceive that public recognition is not only distinct from her primary goal but also that such recognition could even thwart her attempts to achieve it. This gave her considerable power for seeing through what was essential to her art, and what was only superficial. Dickinson does not submit to Higginson’s instruction and even defies her supposed preceptor, as when she opens her fifth letter, “Are these more orderly?”, the pronoun pointing to a set of poems which includes the boast “No Man instructed me” (c. 1862, F381A). The figure of Jacob contending at Peniel appears repeatedly through Dickinson’s writings—from “A little East of Jordan” (F145) to two of the last letters she wrote, including her last to Higginson, which concludes:

Audacity of Bliss, said Jacob to the Angel “I will not let thee go
except I bless thee” - Pugilist and Poet, Jacob was correct -
Your Scholar - (spring 1886, L1042)

The quotation from Jacob here displays how Dickinson employs traditional symbols to explain her goal as a poet: “I bless thee” supplants Jacob’s “thou bless me,” while “Jacob was correct” serves to emphasise the poet’s own audacity, a sense clinched by her boldly incongruous signature. Dickinson’s pseudo-biblical quotation suggests a view of poetry as being analogous to religion. The poet makes it her mission to press the poetic blessing on her friends and literary

correspondents, always taking an indirect line of approach and accepting with good humour the fact that few would likely ever be moved to see the light she saw. Another aspect of her phrase “Audacity of Bliss” comes out in the poem:

There is a strength in proving that it can be borne
Although it tear -
What are the sinews of such cordage for
Except to bear
The ship might be of satin had it not to fight -
To walk on seas requires cedar Feet (c. 1867, F1133)

In his entry for “cedar,” Webster notes that the wood “is remarkable for its durability.” Cedar is not only buoyant like most wood but water repellant and not susceptible to rot when wet. The image provides some natural basis for the unlikely possibility that Dickinson has the ability to “walk on seas”—a miraculous feat with clear associations with the life of Christ, representing the divine power the poet finds in the word. Cut through, a cedar trunk takes a circular shape, which resembles Dickinson’s image of “Circumference,” an area of consciousness dearly bought. Though we often speak of the “growth” of the mind, the organic analogy is often conflated with the ease sometimes referred to as being “natural” (e.g. Keats’ “as naturally as the leaves to a tree”), and this is not Dickinson’s sense at all; for her, such growth requires a massive labour.

The readers of Dickinson’s posthumously published works are comparable to the poet’s own literary correspondents in at least this way: readers who do not already submit to the same economy of growth as Dickinson will find a large part of her work insupportable, while those who submit to it will be enlivened by the difficulties her works often pose. We turn now to the first part of the study, in which we will consider a few of these difficulties, exploring in the first

chapter another aspect of the distinction between the person and the poet by considering Dickinson's manuscripts.

Chapter One

The Poet's Hand and Mechanical Reproduction

HAND, n. ... 1. In *man*, the extremity of the arm, consisting of the palm and fingers, connected with the arm at the wrist; the part with which we hold and use any instrument. ... 5. Act; deed; performance; external action; that is, the effect for the cause, the *hand* being the instrument of action. ... 6. Power of performance; skill. ... 9. Agency; part in performing or executing. Punish every man who had a *hand* in the mischief. We see the *hand* of God in this event. ... 13. That which performs the office of the hand or of a finger in pointing; as the *hand* of a clock ... 15. Form of writing; style of penmanship; as a good *hand*; a bad *hand*; a fine *hand*.

An American Dictionary of the English Language (1844)

While Dickinson apparently hoped her works would be published after her death, the state of her manuscripts raises many questions about how these works should best be put into print. In the preface to *Poems by Emily Dickinson* (1890), Higginson claims that the poems “are here published as they were written, with very few and superficial changes” (v). But since the publication of Thomas H. Johnson’s scholarly edition of the poems (1955), critics have noted changes more plentiful than “few” and not often “superficial” by any stretch of the word. It is now widely known that Dickinson’s first editors exchanged extravagant metaphors for tired ones and corrected “faulty” grammar and rhymes, corrections which generally spoil the sense and mar the rhythm of the poems. Less often recognised are the features of the manuscripts including the character, size, and spacing of her letters, the apparently “non-metrical” lineation, the non-standard spellings, and the odd capitals and odder punctuation. Such features are normally subject to such regularisation when typeset, but recent scholars have argued that they

are essential to Dickinson's poetry. The first of these features can be reproduced only in facsimile, while the rest can be at least roughly rendered in type. In this chapter I attend to the features which are lost in transcription, trying to give the right amount and kind of attention to each of them, extracting from each what I see as its principal significance. I then turn to discuss an aspect of the manuscripts that can be approximated in print but which I argue should not be: the erratic lineation. This subject allows me to clarify my own view of the manuscripts in light of recent scholarship. Developing the distinction between "personal" and "poetic" significance outlined in the last chapter, I respond to proponents of the recent "manuscript school" who believe, with Jerome McGann, that "Dickinson's scripts cannot be read ... as if they were composed with an eye toward some state beyond their handcrafted textual condition" (38). My own belief is that, though their autographic forms are often alluring, Dickinson's "scripts" tend to be taken too seriously in recent accounts, distracting attention from what is poetic in these texts. Though I do not share their conclusions, the recent manuscript scholars serve to remind us of the poet in her own lush atmosphere—independent of the marketplace; these scholars rightly emphasise the line ending as a possible place of meaning, and they provoke the perennially important question of which kinds of attention Dickinson rewards most. I will elaborate this argument when we turn to the sense of the line endings in the third chapter.

In the introduction to *The Birth-mark*, the poet Susan Howe asks, "If experience forges conception, can quick particularities of calligraphic expression ever be converted to type?" (4). The question calls for an obvious "no," but while the "particularities" of Dickinson's autograph versions are undoubtedly "quick," these details only matter to Dickinson's poetry if they point to life in the poems; and where these details only seem to point to vitality but do not, they may misdirect a reader. Such things are an essential part of the performative aspect of Dickinson's

hand and may help to stoke a reader's attention, but in many cases the kinds of attention they have gotten has made the manuscripts seem little more than a stumbling block to finding what is significant in Dickinson's writing.

Jerome McGann, the most prominent academic among the school that came about through Howe, expresses the view that "Johnson's edition goes astray—misrepresents Dickinson's writing—because it has approached her work as if it aspired to a typographical existence" (38). Written five years before Franklin's *Poems of Emily Dickinson* (1998) replaced Johnson's as the standard edition of Dickinson's poems, McGann's criticism applies equally to it. McGann then quotes Johnson's remarks about Todd and Higginson, that they sought "to give the poetry ... the sort of finish which the sensibilities of the time were thought to demand," and asserts that these words "could be applied exactly to Johnson's work" (40). I do not think one needs to be fussy to feel that "exactly" is not the right word here at all. Surely, in the age of Gutenberg, type is generally felt to be the fit "finish" of any writing that makes a strong claim to attention past its own day. This is not to ignore the huge changes to publishing that began to occur in the nineteenth century, when printing had become a major industry; but this is not the point McGann makes. I know of nothing peculiar to the "sensibilities" of Dickinson's time that would support the assumption McGann leaves unexplained.

Yet every general rule admits exceptions, and McGann raises several points that deserve consideration. After asserting that typographical editions go "astray," McGann states his own view:

Dickinson's scripts cannot be read as if they were "printer's copy" manuscripts, or as if they were composed with an eye toward some state beyond their handcrafted textual condition. Her surviving manuscript texts urge us to take them at face value, to treat all her scriptural forms as potentially significant *at the aesthetic or expressive level*. Calligraphic variations have to be carefully scrutinized, the same

way we scrutinize all poetry for lexical nuances at the linguistic level. Some of her scripts are highly ornamental, some are not, and we must attend to these variant features of the texts. In the same way we have to read closely the lineation patterns, and the spacing of the scripts at every level, as well as the choice of papers and other writing materials. In a poetry that has imagined and executed itself as a scriptural rather than a typographical event, all these matters fall under the work's initial horizon of finality. Emily Dickinson's poetry was not written *for* a print medium, even though it was written *in* an age of print. When we come to edit her work for bookish presentation, therefore, we must accommodate our typographical conventions to her work, not the other way round. (38)

While the manuscripts surely deserve this kind and quality of attention, and while they will always rightly claim priority in the study of Dickinson, that they should be followed literally has yet to be demonstrated in the scholarship on them.

An anonymous reviewer in the *Times Literary Supplement* welcomed Johnson's edition of the poems with a sense of relief, reflecting that until it was published "a great deal had been made ... by the scholars, of the pernicious inaccuracies of the various previous printings. One trembled to quote *anything* from Emily Dickinson" ("Emily Dickinson: The Making of an American Poet," 13 January 1956). This passage could have been recycled for a review in 1998, when Harvard published the new, thoroughly revised three volume *Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Attention to different material aspects of Dickinson's manuscripts being then at its height, Franklin's "new" version was viewed with suspicion by many who devoted considerable hours to her work—as if it were simply a fine-tuning of the already established, merely conventional view of the poet's true works.¹ But criticism is a work of quotations explicit and implied, and it is difficult to quote anything with much confidence when one has the shakes.

¹ Although Franklin received the Emily Dickinson International Society's "Award for Outstanding Contribution" (as prominently noted in the front flap of his *Reading Edition* of the poems), when the Society's *Emily Dickinson Journal* devoted its Fall 1999 number to essays in

There can never be a valid reason for ignoring a poet's manuscripts, nor for ceasing to reflect on questions concerning the editing of her works, and the study of Dickinson's manuscripts in recent years reflects the time when literary scholars began to creatively blur the distinctions between bibliography and criticism. The approaches of Howe and McGann have been influential in Dickinson studies over the last twenty years, but there have also been dissenting voices during that time, and they are now being increasingly heard. An errant disciple

response to the *Variorum Edition* (1998) by a number of prominent Dickinson scholars, the majority of them were critical of Franklin's principle of lineation. In the frankly titled first article, "The Franklin Edition of Dickinson: Is That All There Is?", Tim Morris displays a considerable hesitancy:

The decisive "failure" of the 1998 edition, though I'm not sure it's a failure, is Franklin's decision to present the poems in metrically-organized lines, rather than reproducing the line-divisions of the manuscripts. The decisive "success" of the 1998 edition is to include information about the line-divisions of the manuscripts, so that readers can reconstruct the lines on Dickinson's page from the versions that Franklin delivers in print. (2)

My own sense is that the first decision represents Franklin's success, and that the second merely shows his judiciousness as a scholarly editor.

Though the next two essays are by scholars who had invested heavily in Franklin's previous *Manuscript Books*, this does not prevent them from acknowledging Franklin's outstanding contribution to Dickinson studies. The first of these essays, Paul Crumbley (whose *Inflections of the Pen* had been reviewed a year earlier in the journal) concludes by suggesting that Franklin has unfairly made Dickinson into a sort of textual "Prisoner of Chillon" (19). In the second of them, Martha Nell Smith and Ellen Louise Hart (whose manuscript-faithful *Open Me Carefully* appears under review in the same volume) make several general criticisms—including the arguably too-soft "'variorum' is appropriate, as long as readers do not receive the term as synonymous with 'comprehensive,' for though overflowing with information, this new edition is not quite all-inclusive" (24)—before using a few poems to illustrate what they believe is wrong with Franklin's metrically-based lineation.

Domhnall Mitchell's conclusion that Franklin's edition is "an outstanding piece of textual scholarship ... But it is not the final word" (51)—suggests that Franklin's edition deserves to be revised, and his essay together with his more recent *Measures of Possibility: Emily Dickinson's Manuscripts* (2005), provides much in the way of suggested improvements.

Mary Loeffelholz opens her essay by outlining some of the principles Franklin's edition raises before concluding: "I expect to spend the rest of my career as a Dickinson critic ... with Franklin's tactful editorial assistance" (59). Around the same time, the *New England Quarterly* published a seventeen page review by Loeffelholz in which she provides a far more detailed discussion of what is at stake in determining the "incidental" from the "significant" in Dickinson's manuscripts.

of their tradition, Domhnall Mitchell makes the strongest case against McGann and Howe in *Measures of Possibility: Emily Dickinson's Manuscripts* (2005). The book offers over four hundred pages of argument based largely on actual measurements of the manuscripts, the general effect of which is to suggest that many features of Dickinson's manuscripts are in fact "superficial" to the poems—that, in the case of the line endings, "these odd lineations are unintentional—the result of Dickinson's finding herself at the right edge of the page, and so folding her lines over." No tape measure will ever be able to compass what is poetic in a text, but Mitchell has done much to regulate the excesses to which his former school has been so prone.²

Howe's work is based on the very fascinating premise that the seventeenth century "antinomian controversy" is carried on in Dickinson's writing and that her conventional editors have assisted in "the attempted erasure of antinomianism in our [American] culture" (1). The magnitude of Howe's claim gives it force, while the feeling that Dickinson (whose father and brother were both lawyers) had antinomian proclivities is shared by others (Schneidau), and corresponds with the general view of the poet as a rebel. Yet neither Howe nor any of her disciples has shown how Dickinson's oddly divided manuscript lines are significant, leaving us to presume that she violates the laws of English versification for no articulable reason.

Walter Benn Michaels draws out some of the larger implications of Howe's theory in the introduction to *The Shape of the Signifier* (2005), concluding that "the most radical form of Howe's commitment to Dickinson produces a certain indifference to Dickinson" (5). My own work suggests that "certain" here be taken in a strict rather than colloquial sense. The work of Howe's academic followers too often seems disposed to rest in exciting prospects, near the

² In addition to Mitchell's exhaustive work, Crisanne Miller summarises a few of the issues at stake here in her "Controversy in the Study of Dickinson" (*Literary Imagination*, Vol. 6.1 [2004], esp. pp.46-47).

poet's hand but far from the poems and from the standards of critical commentary. On the first page of her study, Howe states: "Lawlessness seen as negligence is at first feminized and then restricted or banished" (1). Neither Howe nor her disciples make us "see" the "lawlessness" of Dickinson's manuscripts as little more than "negligence," unless it is a sort of determinism against all established views.

Unless a last will and testament turns up in the poet's handwriting, it would be very hard to prove that "Emily Dickinson's poetry was not written *for* a print medium." Meanwhile, the number of excellent interpretations which have been written since her works first saw print proves that Dickinson can be read very well in type. While it would be of interest to a drama scholar to know that *Hamlet* was not "written for" a thrust stage, would any scholar deny that the play fits one very well? Dickinson makes many assertions about poetic immortality in her corpus, suggesting that she aspired to be read after her death. None have anything to say about requiring a new medium of presentation for her art. Yet, whatever view we might take of the manuscripts, the proponents of manuscript fidelity have not sufficiently explained how following the manuscripts according to the letter adds to the experience of the poems.

My own sense is that the manuscripts show Dickinson in her element as a writer. Rather than rebellion against established laws of versification and other conventions, Dickinson's hand reflects another aspect of what Higginson refers to as Dickinson's own "exacting standard" ("An Open Portfolio")—her evident love of the way words appear on the page. She writes to Joseph Lyman, an old friend of Dickinson and her family:

We used to think, Joseph, when I was an unsifted girl and you so scholarly that words were cheap & weak. Now I dont know of anything so mighty. There are [those] to which I lift my hat when I see them sitting princelike among their peers on the page.

Sometimes I write one, and look at his outlines till he glows as no sapphire. (qtd. in Sewall, *Lyman* 78)

Dickinson's autograph reflects the "wildly wise" mind which Emerson thinks typical of the poet (*EL* 445), but it does so exquisitely well, so that the hand seems to have been perfectly attuned to the words during the act of writing. Dickinson's handwriting provides many opportunities to appreciate the "outlines" of her words. Though I have never had the opportunity to hold or see one of the actual manuscripts, I regularly take a sense of their power from the facsimile versions, despite the fact that these are obviously reduced through print or digital reproduction. Such features may point to what is "mighty" in the words, but as I see it such features point only to what is general and personal (reflecting, say, Dickinson's exalted spirit), and what is "princelike" in Dickinson's words is transferable to print.

◦ 2 ◦

Lyman left among his papers a brief prose sketch of Dickinson at some point during her most fruitful years as a poet (c.1862-5). A full quarter of the sketch is given to her hands—

small, firm, deft but utterly ~~discharged~~ emancipated from all ~~fleshy~~ claspings of perishable things, very firm strong little hands absolutely under control of the brain, types of quite rugged health ... (qtd. in Sewall, *Lyman* 69)

No other record exists to verify this portrait of the poet's hands, or to confirm that they really held this much sense. Granting that Lyman's sketch is "romantic and idealized," Sewall notes that it is "not without solid factual interest" (*Lyman* 68), which is fair but far too vaguely put. I

see little reason to doubt the facts of Lyman's sketch, once these are separated from its merely "romantic and idealized" parts.

Lyman may be open to the charge of putting meanings he has found in the poet's writing into her little hands—"utterly ~~discharged~~ emancipated from all ~~fleshy~~ claspings of perishable things." But this description does apply very well to many of Dickinson's poems, so many of which show her reaching toward imperishable things. We may also doubt Lyman's faith in things so "absolutely under control of the brain." But at least he does not call the poet's hands "spasmodic," as Higginson describes her "gait" (7 June 1862, L265); and Lyman's phrase expresses well a wish of all poets: that the writing prove adequate to the sense as much as possible. So, Lyman's "types of quite rugged health" merely needs a new antitype to have a real basis. The fact that many sensible readers have found the poems alive and themselves more vital for reading them is only one of several alternatives. Yet, whatever the limitations of Lyman's sketch of Dickinson's hands, it gets at a truth about her handwriting, which continues to strike those who see it in its own peculiar ways.

The peculiar quality of Dickinson's hand is easily seen by browsing through *The Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson* (1981), or by looking at one of the many digital images now readily available on-line. It is noted early on by Dickinson's first two editors, who included a four page facsimile of "There came a Day at Summer's full" (c. 1862; F325) in *Poems, Second Series* (1891). A few weeks after his "Letter to a Young Contributor" appeared as the leading article in the *Atlantic Monthly* the poet's first letter arrived in the mail. Though his article elicited "a passel of mail" from other "young" poets that month (Wineapple 6), Higginson still recalled the event nearly thirty years later, writing in "Emily Dickinson's Letters" (*AM*, October 1891):

The letter was postmarked “Amherst,” and it was in a handwriting so peculiar that it seemed as if the writer might have taken her first lessons by studying the famous fossil bird-tracks in the museum of that college town. Yet it was not in the slightest degree illiterate, but cultivated, quaint, and wholly unique. (444)

Higginson here contrasts the appearance of the handwriting to the style of the writing: while the first appears primitive, the second is “cultivated, quaint, and wholly unique.” The image of the bird was commonly used for female poets at the time (Small 31), but Higginson’s description of Dickinson’s handwriting is entirely novel: like “fossil bird-tracks,” the poet’s hand gives form to prehistoric life. Although I do not think that it is essential to her writing, Dickinson’s handwriting might be taken to signify the way her poetic style stands out generally from that of the British and American poets of her day.

But while handwriting is fairly distinguished from writing, it clearly mattered to Higginson, and if Dickinson had wished to please him it should have mattered to her. On the second page of his “Letter,” he advises:

Look to the physical aspect of your manuscript, and prepare your page so neatly that it shall allure instead of repelling. Use good pens, black ink, nice white paper and plenty of it. Do not emulate “paper-sparing Pope,” whose chaotic manuscript of the “Iliad,” written chiefly on the backs of old letters, still remains in the British Museum. If your document be slovenly, the presumption is that its literary execution is the same, Pope to the contrary notwithstanding. An editor’s eye becomes carnal, and is easily attracted by a comely outside. If you really wish to obtain his good-will for your production, do not first tax his time for deciphering it. (402)

Dickinson uses “black ink” both in her letter to Higginson and in the four poems that accompanied it, while the size and spacing of her handwriting suggests no attempt to skimp on “nice white paper.” It is with these rudimentary features that Dickinson comes closest to satisfying Higginson’s *Atlantic* advice on the appearance of the manuscript. That Dickinson is

following Higginson's advice, however, seems unlikely. Her letters to friends before this time are usually also written in pen on good white paper. It seems Higginson's *Atlantic* "style sheet" only reflected ordinary good manners on the point. The fact that Higginson never mentions penmanship explicitly in his article may help us recall at once his own strongly democratic sympathies and his general good sense. Some dull people manage to have very interesting signatures, and some bright ones do not. The best calligraphy cannot save a dull poem from dullness. But Higginson's advice to "prepare your page so neatly that it shall allure instead of repelling" clearly spells out that—whatever the character of the script—the letters should look not only presentable but also attractive and easily legible to readers. Although I do not think that Dickinson ever simply followed Higginson's advice, but rather sought it to know the worst that would be said against her poems, she is simply too conscious in her writings to suspect that she did not employ her handwriting to arouse interest in her writing. The poet's hand may not be "absolutely under control of the brain" but her poems show that—when she was writing—her hand and mind acted in perfect unison with each other, which makes her manuscripts the perfect expression of the poet at play.

Dickinson must have known about her hand's strange power and she apparently used it to attract Higginson's "carnal" eye, but more than this it serves as an index to her mind at work. It is as if she felt that her peculiar handwriting would represent her thought better than a more neatly prepared script. In any case, shortly before initiating the correspondence with Higginson (15 April 1862, L260), Dickinson sends a similarly poetic epistle in the same hand to her friend Samuel Bowles (early April 1862, L259); neither manuscript shows any obvious difference from the other in the style of the hand. Using a strangely familiar hand in her letter to the public writer, Dickinson shows no effort to write more legibly than usual, practically refusing to

observe the decorum that usually governs such situations. That she plainly goes against the explicit advice of the man she purports to be contacting for an opinion suggests that she would only have his opinion on her own terms; that, from the beginning of their correspondence, Dickinson was determined to influence how their relationship might play out; and it proved to play out very well for her.

Dickinson's handwriting is not the only peculiar thing Higginson found in her letter. He adds:

But the most curious thing about the letter was the total absence of a signature. It proved, however, that she had written her name on a card, and put it under the shelter of a smaller envelope inclosed in the larger; and even this name was written—as if the shy writer wished to recede as far as possible from view—in pencil, not in ink. (“Emily Dickinson's Letters” 445)

If only Higginson had struck out the adjective “shy” and pondered why the writer might wish “to recede as far as possible from view,” he might have understood why Dickinson employs different instruments for her writing and for her personal signature. Yet, assuming that her hand was not absolutely out of the control of her brain, Dickinson's general point appears to have been made: she demands the reader's attention, and will adopt a striking style to get it. She recognises that Higginson may be “too deeply occupied” to notice what matters in her writing, or to read it at all; but she does everything she can properly do to secure his reply.

Dickinson's other editor, Mabel Loomis Todd, worked closely with Dickinson's manuscripts over several years and also found the handwriting peculiar. She is the first to suggest

that Dickinson's manuscripts can be dated according to the handwriting.³ In the "Preface" to *Poems* (1891), Todd records her view of the development of the poet's script:

The handwriting was at first somewhat like the delicate, running Italian hand of our elder gentlewomen; but as she advanced in breadth of thought, it grew bolder and more abrupt, until in her latest years each letter stood distinct and separate from its fellows. (5-6)

Todd's observations about Dickinson's style are characteristically keen, and the extant letters from the poet's early teens support her view. Though Todd's account of the development of the poet's handwriting is less intriguing than Higginson's it seems the more plausible of the two. Far from being native to New England like the "fossil bird-tracks," Dickinson's handwriting seems to be an exquisite outgrowth of a poet raised on Continental models, one of her typical naturalised Americanisms. Todd's account is corroborated by Vivian Pollak, who describes the handwriting of Emily Norcross Dickinson's courtship letters as "elegant" (xviii).

But while Todd offers a more plausible source of influence than "fossil bird-tracks," the conclusion of the story Todd tells of the evolution of Dickinson's handwriting ("each letter stood distinct and separate from its fellows") is not innocent of the national mythology that is found in many writings from the mid-century onwards, including Higginson's "Letter to a Young Contributor," in which he encourages "Americanism" and boasts: "To the previous traditions and associations of the English tongue we add resources of contemporary life such as England cannot rival. Political freedom makes every man an individual" (406). The poet's hand stands as well as a distinct reminder of the way post-Romantic poets generally stand "distinct and separate" from

³ Johnson extends this idea in the front matter of *Poems* (1955), including twenty one different specimens of Dickinson's handwriting by approximate year followed by eleven pages of notes on "Characteristics of the Handwriting."

their fellows: that they represent the most original voices that have been spoken on earth, and which we should not willingly see lost after the death of their author. We might suspect that Todd's description says more about her own view of the poet than it does about the script,⁴ but Dickinson herself would have known how such aspects could pique a reader's imagination and add to the mythology surrounding an author.

In the "Introductory" to *Letters of Emily Dickinson*, Todd notes: "In her later years, Emily Dickinson rarely addressed envelopes: it seemed as if her sensitive nature shrank from the publicity which even her handwriting would undergo, in the observation of indifferent eyes." She then adds:

Various expedients were resorted to,—obliging friends frequently performed this office for her; sometimes a printed newspaper label was pasted upon the envelope; but the actual strokes of her own pencil were, so far as possible, reserved exclusively for friendly eyes. (viii)

The portrait recalls Dickinson's wish to avoid publicity, and that her handwriting attracts attention. This could be thought of as mere "eccentricity," but the scheme of Shakespeare's King Henry IV—whereby he would go out in public only rarely, and then only sumptuously, to ensure that he was "Ne'er seen but wondered at" (3.2.57)—illuminates what the poet of "Circumference" does by appearing so unusual. Before we have even read a single word, Dickinson's hand strikes us in many ways. With an eye on Dickinson's peculiar poetic style, William Dean Howells remarks: "It is the soul of an abrupt, exalted New England woman that speaks in such brokenness" (320), an impression that is given as well by the manuscripts. This "abrupt, exalted New England woman" speaks not only through but with her "hand."

⁴ Wand and Sewall explain the same changes to Dickinson's handwriting by tracing it to an eye condition that first began to afflict the poet in her early thirties (404).

Yet there is also a less “exalted” character, usually found in the marginal variants, where the height, width, shape (printed or cursive), and spacing of the letters is less peculiar. We can thus distinguish two different characters. Naming the “exalted” character “dancing”—after Dickinson’s “I cannot dance upon my Toes - / No Man instructed me”—we might distinguish it from the more pedestrian script which represents the poet at revisions. The exalted character represents the poet’s imagination—

But oftentimes, among my mind
 A Glee possesseth me
 That had I Ballet Knowledge -
 Would put itself abroad
 In Pirouette to blanch a Troupe -
 Or lay a Prima - mad -

(c. 1862, F381A)

We recall Mary Higginson’s question to her husband, “Why do the insane so cling to you,” having in mind the woman he refers to later as “my partially cracked poet at Amherst” (qtd. in *Letters* II.570). The handwriting itself possesses a “Glee” about it—as if its author were quite at peace during the act of writing; as if something like “Ballet Knowledge” actually “put itself abroad” through the poet’s hand while writing these words. However we care to describe it, Dickinson’s is not the kind of penmanship that wins prizes in schools. Yet it is striking and typical of Dickinson’s hand in performance.

Other peculiarities are also observable in the character of the hand, e.g. the horizontal line in the lower-case *t* is frequently mis-crossed in the original performance, but rarely in revision. For instance, when she writes “the,” the horizontal line is sometimes made to cross the vertical line in the *h*, while at other times the line appears over the *e* (as if it were a macron, i.e. *lhē*). Similarly, “to” frequently appears as *lō* in the manuscripts. Such features could suggest simple

casualness in the writer, and the fact that the poems Dickinson sends to Higginson in her first letter and after would not normally be described as “clean copies” suggests how she uses her hand to excite her reader—or risk turning him away. These features can reflect the thought of the poems, as in the well-known lines—

Of Bronze - and Blaze
The North - tonight
So adequate - it forms - (c. early 1862, Fasc.13/F319),

where the two *t* *s* in “tonight” are crossed with a single slantwise line beginning above the first *t* and ending about where it should after the second, which the line intersects closer to the foot than it should.⁵

In “He fumbles at your Soul” (c. late 1862, Fasc.22/F477), the character of the original script is unique in the best sense—bold and even a bit mysterious, developed through practice not simply applied from a schoolbook, and not only free of any rigid “textbook” quality but itself free from internal consistency, combining cursive with printed script, often within a single word. For instance, the lower-case *s* that heads “substance” is markedly different from that which heads “stuns” in the previous line, and the capitalised “Soul” in the opening one. The spacing between the non-cursive characters, and between the words more generally, is frequently erratic. This reflects the spontaneity and freedom of Dickinson’s work, a certain wildness that is not without sense, though this may not be the “sense” of the mind in an ordinary state.

In contrast, the revised script is noticeably smaller, its characters more proportionately spaced and generally closer to printed than to cursive script. For instance, under the word that

⁵ The form of the word on the page seems to me to warrant capitalisation. But Franklin is far more knowledgeable about Dickinson’s handwriting than I am, and generally shows sound judgment.

appears as *subslānce* in line 5 (its *t* not crossed), the variant “nature” is written neatly (its *t* crossed without a fault). Under the final line “The Firmaments - are still” the variant “The Universe - is still” appears, the last four letters of the original “still” being in cursive, while the entire word is printed in the revised line. Such details are representative of Dickinson’s revisions, in which the character is generally more regular. Border-cases exist (e.g. where cursive and printed letters appear together) but these tend to suggest they were written very soon after the original performance.

◦ 3 ◦

In an essay co-authored with Sandra Chung and included in the popular Blackwell *Companion to Emily Dickinson* (2008), the veteran manuscript scholar Ellen Louise Hart rather seems to demonstrate the mistakes that can take place when Dickinson’s poems are read “with an eye toward ... their handcrafted textual condition.” Hart and Chung interpret the non-standard lineation and variable space between words in the manuscripts as being significant metrically and visually, but they do not do so convincingly. Interpreting the first two “visual lines” of Dickinson’s most celebrated poem (c. late 1862, Fasc.23/F479)—

Because I could not
stop for Death -

—the authors argue that the spacing of the words “suggests that a reader pause and then emphasize ‘I’ and ‘not,’” and that such prominences serve to indicate “which words can be sounded above others.” Hart and Chung never explain the sense of these pauses, leaving us to

wonder what meaning an emphatic “I” might take in this context, and what meaning an emphatic “not.”

Hart and Chung then turn to consider the non-metrical line break, noting that “the words before and after the break” also deserve “extra weight” (349). But “stop” is already signalled for “extra weight” if we read the opening words in a regular metre (in which case it is perfectly iambic tetrameter), and “not” has already received “extra weight” from the spacing of the “visual line.” Though the variable spacing and non-metrical lineation are suggestive of some things, their “consequences for performance and interpretation” (348) appear to be either negative or negligible; they represent Dickinson’s “power of performance” with a pen (*ADEL*, “hand,” sense 6), but they do not appear to point at any sense in her words.

That Hart and Chung’s “visual line” is awkward in rhythm and inflection is never mentioned by the writers. In their reading of the lines, “not” competes with “stop” for emphasis, and considering that “not” bears the double weight of the white space before and after it, the word appears to take first place in the manuscript version. Yet, if we ignore questions about the lineation, spacing, and even rhythm of Dickinson’s words, and turn rather to their meanings in the context of her poem, the poem’s key word is clearly “stop.” This is confirmed by the poem’s scenario, where “stop” takes the sense of “pick up (for a carriage ride),” to suggest a courting ritual; and in the imagery of motion and rest that runs throughout the poem, including the three lines beginning “We passed” as well as their two echoing phrases, “He passed” and “We paused.” In this case attention to the “visual line” does not contribute to the meaning of the words. Rather, this detail of the hand obscures what is poetic in the words. It is not the only example of how Dickinson’s handwriting can distract attention from her poetry.

Of the apparently non-metrical lineation of the lines in Dickinson's manuscripts, McGann is certain: "It does no good to argue, as some might, that these odd lineations are unintentional—the result of Dickinson's finding herself at the right edge of the page, and so folding her lines over" (28). McGann's argument is with Johnson, who generally lineates the poems according to standard measures. Rejecting the possibility that Dickinson also had these standards in mind, McGann argues with a higher cause in view: "Her text—unlike Johnson's—has so loosened the hinges of its more formal subtext as to throw its words open to surprising linguistic possibilities" (31). McGann's postmodernism comes through explicitly here. He associates stanzaic form with constraint, and ignores the long tradition of poets celebrating the way formal constraints can also be expressively liberating.

Both McGann and Howe are knowledgeable about poetic conventions, and both adopt the conventional poetic standard whereby the line ending gives prominence to a word or phrase and thus affords an additional possibility of significance; it is not the convention but the number of "openings" the two writers dispute. McGann illustrates his conviction about Dickinson's "odd lineation" by using two lines from the manuscript of "Many a phrase has the English language" (c. early 1862, Fasc.12/F333), which appear as follows:

Breaking in bright Orthogra-
phy

McGann explains in the next sentence: "The script is simply being turned into an emblem of itself" (28), evidently taking "Orthography" in its etymological sense of "correct writing," but without restricting the meaning of the latter word to the established sense of "spelling." While it is easy enough to infer McGann's sense from the etymology, it appears neither in Webster nor in the *OED* and the poem itself never spells it out. In order to become "an emblem of itself," the

line requires McGann's sense of "Orthography," yet this sense has no obvious basis in Dickinson's poem. Considering that he urges readers "to treat *all* her scriptural forms as potentially significant at the aesthetic or expressive level," McGann shows very little care for the words of the poem at all. A construction which does not take its basis in established usage must find a basis in the poem. Rather than staking his claim in the poem's language, McGann adheres only to the appearance of the words on the page, asserting: "She did not have to do this, her page had space for the whole of the metrical unit" (28), which is technically true but shows no awareness of the practical difficulties of writing at the very borders of a page. Granted, if Dickinson had written the entire line with a bit less gusto, all the letters of "Orthography" would have easily appeared on a single line. But this requires the questionable assumption that Dickinson was willing to write with less gusto, restraining her hand to fit the page. As very little white space follows "Orthogra-", McGann's claim recalls Lyman's view of the poet's hand, implying an incredible amount of control on Dickinson's part—that she was able to execute the line just in the nick of time. I see no reason for denying that Dickinson might have exercised such control; what seems doubtful is that Dickinson had such control but did not do any better to indicate the importance of the word division by reducing the size of her letters. If the division were in fact significant, Dickinson might have written "Breaking in bright Orthogra-" and left too much additional space to admit any doubt that the division is deliberate. What seems more likely is that Dickinson simply did not care whether every letter fit the line or not.

McGann's reading of "Breaking in bright Orthography" is representative of his attention to the manuscript lineation. He makes compelling assertions about the lines without offering corresponding readings of the poems. In fact, he barely offers any explanation of the poems at all. My own attempts to corroborate his readings make me rather doubtful of his assertions.

Readers may find something more than I have in the “visible language” of “Experience is the Angled Road” (c. early 1865, Set 5/F899), which is McGann’s next example of how Dickinson’s manuscript lineation makes “repeated moves to isolate words and phrases, to fracture the traditional meter and syntax that serve as the basic subtext of the writing” (31). But while the poem is used for similar ends by Howe, as well as by James Longenbach in *The Art of the Poetic Line* (2007), none of these writers offers a convincing explanation of why Dickinson would “fracture” the conventional meter that structures the poem, or how the manuscript line breaks enrich the writing. In a literary culture that, at its worst, encourages the shunning of conventions and metre in themselves, an answer to this question will be fairly obvious; but while Dickinson may well have shunned these things, the default position on these points was quite opposite to ours in the literary culture of her time.

The manuscript version does indeed “isolate words and phrases,” as McGann says. He transcribes the poem as follows:

Experience is the Angled
Road
Preferred against the
Mind
By—Paradox—The
Mind itself
Presuming it to lead

Quite opposite—How
Complicate
The discipline of
Man—
Compelling him to
Choose Himself
His Preappointed Pain—

The manuscript lineation isolates “Road,” “Mind,” “Complicate” and “Man” on lines to themselves, while it nearly doubles the poem’s line endings, being fourteen metrically irregular lines to the eight regular ones. But McGann never examines why these words and phrases are thus isolated. Of the additional line endings—Angled, the, The, How, of, to—only the first stands out in itself as possibly having anything like major importance. This is not to deny that minor words (the adjective being the closest I can come to describing the five other words) can take major roles, but I can see no way in which any one of them carries any special weight among the surrounding words of the poem. Since the first addition takes special prominence in the manuscript version, being set at the end of the first line of the poem, we might try to explain why it warrants unusual prominence. It can, of course, be argued that the breaking of “Angled / Road” over two lines enacts the kind of turning that “Experience” is said to involve. This reading is plausible, but it raises the question of how the enactment fits into the overall economy of the poem. My own feeling is that the line ending subtracts more pleasure than it gives. This much at least is true of each of the poem’s non-metrical line endings: they ruin the pleasure of the regular measure. But, even if we bracket considerations of the poem’s rhythm, the manuscript lineation reduces the effect of the words. The opening line in the manuscript—

Experience is the Angled

—naturally prompts the question, “the Angled *what?*” As we swing around to the next line, we might think momentarily, “This could lead somewhere.” But the thought comes to a dead end in the solitary word “Road,” which heads and ends the next line. The “fracture” to the metre sets us up for disappointment. We are made to expect a surprise that never comes.

Dickinson's opening lines often pack a good punch, but even in the metrically regular version, this is not one of them:

Experience is the Angled Road

This is nicely put, but the thought is commonly encountered and suggests a roughened eye, the sum of the thought being that experience does not take place in a straight line. An opening need not be striking to be effective, but holding off the noun to the next line proves distracting without reason. At the moment we are forming our first impression of the poem, we are disappointed without pleasure. It seems better to take the established path of poetic feet than the one less travelled where the latter only holds out the false hope of sense untrodden.

Not just disappointing, the manuscript lineation detracts from what is striking about the poem: the way it redefines experience against the ordinary view not as "the Angled Road" but as "the Mind itself." The "normalized" lineation helps us see this—

Experience is
.....
.....- the Mind itself⁶

—the parallelism here being at once visual and aural; indicated at once by the page and by the two regular tetrameters. One line begins, the other ends, with Dickinson's intended sense. This poem perplexes many readers, and I will return to it in Chapter 5 when I come to Dickinson's use of paradox. For now it should be noted how the poem's regular arrangement in print helps to grasp its sense. Rather than illustrating the significance of Dickinson's "odd lineations," the

⁶ Here and below I have replaced characters with periods so as to represent as accurately as possible the lineation as it should appear when typeset in 12 point Times New Roman (as with the rest of this essay).

poem shows what is lost by relaying Dickinson's linguistic events in print as they are in manuscript. Howe rightly celebrates what she describes as "an inner law of form" (145), but she fails to acknowledge that the majority of pre-twentieth century poetry can manifest as much in the conventional line. Dickinson wrote with a sense of the metrical line (which is not always also a regular line), and she must be read with the same sense.

◦ 4 ◦

We conclude with Dickinson's poem about one of "Nature's People" for whom she does not "feel ... a transport / Of Cordiality" (c. late 1865, Set 6c/F1096B). This familiar example is especially valuable since it is the only one of the ten poems published in Dickinson's lifetime about which she makes any practical comment in the surviving letters. The poem was published, without her permission, in the *Springfield Republican* for Valentine's Day 1866. Shortly after this, Dickinson complains to Higginson: "it was robbed of me - defeated too of the third line by the punctuation" (c. early 1866, L316). Here are the opening lines as they are aligned on the manuscript page:

A narrow Fellow in
the Grass
Occasionally rides -
You may have met Him -
did you not
His notice sudden is - (1137)

Adopting "materialist" editing procedures, Howe rejects Franklin's assumption about Dickinson that "the form lurking in her mind is the *stanza*," to which Howe adds: "I cannot assert that

Dickinson composed in stanzas and was careless about line breaks” (134, 145), emphasising her point through understatement and exaggeration at the same time.

Howe reasonably expects an editor to show “care and sensitivity” (174), and surely these virtues must inform any decision about how to divide Dickinson’s manuscript lines in print. But Franklin shows great care in his lineations in *Poems* (1998), and does not arbitrarily apply the metrical norm to any poems. In fact, Franklin regularly follows Johnson by including many line endings that break the stanzaic mold, and he consistently shows an acute sense of those endings he deems “incidental characteristics of the artifact” (35). Surely “care and sensitivity” are virtues in an editor only as long as they are based in discernment about the text being edited, and how it will be best presented to readers.

With these thoughts in mind, let us consider the relative merits of the manuscript lineation of the opening against that of the familiar published version, which presents the poems in regular stanzas:

A narrow Fellow in the Grass
Occasionally rides -
You may have met Him - did you not
His notice sudden is - (c. late 1865, Set 6c/F1096B)

With the six line manuscript version of the stanza in mind, it could be argued that this version cancels the surprise caused by the breaking of the opening tetrameter in the manuscript, where the object of the preposition is left unsaid until the second line:

A narrow Fellow in
the Grass

The phrase “narrow Fellow” at first suggests a human (one of “narrow” mind?), and to find such a “Fellow” in this way—not “on” but “in” the grass—is striking. The “Fellow,” of course, turns out to be a non-human creature, and finding him “in” the grass makes perfect sense. Yet the momentary confusion plants an idea that is undeniably crucial to the thought of the poem. The word “Fellow” is repeated in the final stanza, clinching the ironic sense that this creature is the only one of “Nature’s People” who arouses “a tighter Breathing / And Zero at the Bone” in the speaker—a description apparently applicable to the snake as well, an ambiguity hinting at the one thing she seems to share with this startling creature.

But while the broken tetrameter causes these responses, it also causes trouble. Among the many functions of a regular metre, the production of momentum can be very useful, but breaking the common measure before it can be established prevents any sort of momentum in the verse. The ruining of a poem’s natural rhythm seems a very high price to pay for the slight surprise and extra resonance of the manuscript version. It is not the only cost incurred by reading the manuscripts without seeking out the meaning of the words. By the time the snake is introduced, the several shocks of the manuscript lineation detract from his startling appearance:

You may have met Him -
did you not
His notice sudden is -

Here the metrical disruption draws attention away from the snake, giving prominence to words tangential to the main action while weakening the impact of the weirdly worded fourth line.

When these lines are set in the conventional metrical frame—

You may have met Him - did you not
His notice sudden is -

—the last line does what it describes: coming after the tetrameter, in which the thought is made to unfold more slowly, having not only an additional foot but a medial pause (represented by the dash after “Him”), the image of the snake appears more suddenly in the short line.

Dickinson’s complaint to Higginson—“it was robbed of me - defeated too of the third line by the punctuation” (L316)—may strike us as prophetic of recent theories about her manuscripts. Although she refers to the question mark that appears after “did you not” in the newspaper version, transcribed as six lines these words are “defeated by the punctuation” once again. The free verse tradition has been dominant among students of American poetry for more than half a century and this scholarship too often ignores the long tradition that preceded it. It makes sense to examine Dickinson’s manuscripts against modern experiments, but the line endings found in Franklin’s edition make a lot more sense if we consider them with the surrounding words. “We see - Comparatively” (F580), as Dickinson says.

Recent manuscript critics might invoke the principle of “Possibility” for making sense of Dickinson’s life and poems, finding a basis in her boast:

I dwell in Possibility -
A fairer House than Prose -
More numerous of Windows -
Superior - for Doors - (c. late 1862, Fasc.22/F466)

Yet without a firm sense of what “Possibility” means here, other than a mode of writing that is more comprehensive than “Prose” (itself a generatively vague term), this principle seems at best a bit insecure. “Windows” and “Doors” imply frames, and though they may open onto the sky, what makes them valuable is the kind of view they afford of life and of the life in words. The manuscript lineation is admittedly “More numerous” in apertures, but often the practical

effect of this in the examples given by its advocates is to close, or at least to obscure, the “Superior” ones, the lines in these examples being rich in sensation but relatively poor in sense. Whether metrically regular or not, all poems offer a variety of opportunities to take a rest and thus they raise different possibilities for emphasis; as with interpretation generally, the best way to face the dilemmas posed by competing versions seems to be to consider the possibilities but to prefer the ones that make the most sense, both in the context of the poem and in the poetic corpus as a whole. Which performance reveals a rhythm richer in feeling, creates the greater harmony between the words as vehicles of sense and sound? That is only one of many questions that should be asked in such instances.

Though the principle of “Possibility” should be considered when facing problems posed by her texts, reading the manuscript lines against the metrically regular ones proves the principle is not in itself sufficient for solving them. So, the middle ground proposed by Longenbach—“What matters most is the dilemma itself, not any particular solution” (80)—seems more safe than sound. This “dilemma” may well inspire vital readings of the poems, but in the examples discussed the manuscript lineation proves rather deadening to Dickinson’s poetry. To a reader seeking this poetry, what matters most is not the number of “Windows” and “Doors” a poem has but the sort of view or access each affords into other parts of the poem, the poem as a whole, and the corpus more generally.

There are many remarkable things about Dickinson’s handwriting. But what is peculiar to the handwriting should not distract us from what is poetic in her work. As long as “poetry” is something experienced and not positively identifiable in the writing, Dickinson’s manuscripts will always hold poetic values which mere print transcriptions cannot, and so they will always have priority in any reading of Dickinson, but judicious transcriptions will always prove helpful

to those without access to Dickinson's manuscripts in fact or facsimile, as well as to those simply unprepared to give the poems the attention they require in the poet's hand. But if—rather than “style of handwriting”—we take “hand” to mean “that which performs the office of the hand or of a finger in pointing,” the poet's hand is most often seen best in print.

With the exception of the character of the handwriting itself (not only the forms of letters but their total form on the page), the features of Dickinson's manuscripts discussed up to this point could be rendered without too much difficulty in mechanical type. In the next chapter we turn to a few other features which not only can but generally should be represented in all responsible transcriptions of the poems. These aspects can serve not only to convey some of the excitement associated with the poet's hand but also how they serve to enhance the representation of her thought.

Chapter Two

Preserving the Silvan Way 1: Orthography and Punctuation

Dupont de Nemours asserted that he understood eleven words of the Pigeon language, the same number of that of Fowls, fourteen of the Cat tongue, twenty-two of that of Cattle, thirty of that of Dogs, and the Raven language he understood completely. But the ordinary observer seldom attains farther than to comprehend some of the cries of anxiety and fear around him...

T.W. Higginson, "The Life of Birds"

She was much too enigmatical a being for me to solve in an hour's interview, and an instinct told me that the slightest attempt at direct cross-examination would make her withdraw into her shell; I could only sit still and watch, as one does in the woods; I must name my bird without a gun, as recommended by Emerson.

T.W. Higginson, "Emily Dickinson's Letters"

A year before they met in person for the first time, Dickinson sent Higginson a letter largely preoccupied with the experience of reading letters. Her thoughts on the experience shed good light on the challenge she faces using her hand to represent her mind in words. The first page of the letter reads:

Amherst

Dear friend

A Letter always feels to me like immortality because it is the mind alone without corporeal friend. Indebted in our talk to attitude and accent, there seems a spectral power in thought that walks alone -

(June 1869, L330)

The two writers met only twice in life—each “corporeal friend” spending a grand total of only two or three hours with the other—and the correspondence gave Dickinson ample chance for all sorts of related reflections. It also gave the poet a chance to amplify the sense of her words by the use of notation—by which I refer to the non-lexical marks she made on the manuscript pages, as well as the lineation which editors like Franklin have assumed she took for granted.

Dickinson’s letter proves that she was aware of her artistic medium and of the challenges it posed for the representation of her thought; she expresses this awareness later in another letter to Higginson: “a Pen has so many inflections and a Voice but one” (August 1876, L470), stating one of the challenges explicitly in both the draft and the final versions of another letter: “What a hazard an Accent is!” (late summer 1885, L1011; 887). If writing is compared to speech, it might be viewed negatively as striking out two fundamental rules of the game, leaving considerably more pressure on a writer than a speaker, but also giving a writer more freedom to display her powers in the art. Though abolishing our debt to “attitude and accent,” writing brings with it the risk of misrepresentation—the fact that the words might fail to communicate the writer’s thought.

In a passage that helps illuminate what Dickinson calls “the mind alone without corporeal friend,” I.A. Richards suggests how the “spectral power in thought that walks alone” is put into writing:

Poetry translates into its special sensory language a great deal that is given in the ordinary daily intercourse between minds by gestures, tones of voice, and expression, and a reader who is very quick and discerning in these matters may fail for purely technical reasons to apprehend the very same things when they are given in verse. (319)

Using an organic metaphor recalling Dickinson’s conception of writing, Richards finds nothing greater for expressing “our everyday emotional life” in words than the technical limitations

Using an organic metaphor recalling Dickinson's conception of writing, Richards finds nothing greater for expressing "our everyday emotional life" in words than the technical limitations imposed by poetry. Readers prove "quick and discerning" about a poet's "gestures, tones of voice, and expression" by acquiring proficiency in her special language, by learning to grasp the spectral power of her thought.

This bright source of energy often reaches a great intensity in Dickinson's poetry, making it at times very difficult to follow. In "Emily Dickinson's Notation" (1960), R.P. Blackmur compares the writing of a poet to "notes on the musical score" to observe that

the notation is always inadequate, by itself, in predicting performance or reading. As the poet was saying so much more, so the reader is left with more or less to do for himself as the notation wills him or fails him. That is why the poem which has seemed flat will spring into life when one has got intimate with that will. (226)

Blackmur then suggests that poetic notation is "at best only about fifteen per cent adequate for a full reading" and complains that "in Dickinson's case the notation in the words seldom reaches the feasible maximum even with intimacy" (226). Having failed to represent her mind on the page, Dickinson has left readers to depend primarily on luck and cunning to make her poems "spring into life." Blackmur's "even with intimacy" reflects Higginson's view of the private poet, and looks ahead to recent theories of Dickinson's poetry as being "too intimate for print" (Jackson, "Thinking" 218; cf. Chapter 4 below). Later in the same paragraph Blackmur makes his comparison of the poet to "a cat ... speaking English, our own language, but without the pressure of all the other structures we are accustomed to attend." My own sense is that Dickinson met the limitations of her medium very well: her notation helps to direct the mind and voice of the reader through the experience of the poem. Whatever percentage adequate it may prove to her thought, Dickinson's notation rarely fails to represent her sense. In this chapter and the next

sense of her words. In this chapter, we begin with the marks of standard orthography and punctuation, including the capitalisation of the first letter of a word (hereafter, simply “capitalisation” or “capitals”).

◦ 2 ◦

Mabel Loomis Todd was in a good position to be Emily Dickinson’s best first reader. She was well educated, impressively intelligent, and had been romantically involved with Dickinson’s brother since September 1882, while the poet was still alive. Todd prepared Dickinson’s poems and letters for publication in the first part of the 1890s, and kept up her fascination with her lover’s sister till her death in 1932. Todd passed down manuscripts in her possession to her daughter, Millicent Todd Bingham, who went on to co-edit *Bolts of Melody: New Poems of Emily Dickinson* (1945) and to author two books on Dickinson and her circle. Todd also continued to collect whatever she could in the way of writings by, and anecdotes surrounding, the Amherst poet. Writing to Todd in December 1931, Georgiana Adams Mills recalls a poem which Dickinson had sent to a friend of hers “with some arbutus.” Mills transcribes the poem from memory, explaining: “I regret that I cannot quote the capitals or punctuation—if any, as it was passed on by word of mouth” (Franklin 1436). The fact that Mills offers this explanation—and the way she words it as a “regret”—suggests that she is responding to a specific request by Todd for a faithful rendering. Todd knew such things could shed light on Dickinson’s thinking.

Such features cannot possibly be noticed when Dickinson’s poems are “passed on by word of mouth,” yet they cannot possibly be ignored by those who encounter Dickinson on the page. Surely the most obtrusive and apparently superficial aspects of her style, Dickinson’s

orthography and punctuation are also the wildest aspects of her style. Her notation generally seems so wild that though few readers fail to notice it, few find it easy to explain. The same is true of her critics and scholars.

Since its 1955 publication, Johnson's *The Poems of Emily Dickinson* (1955) has been viewed as a high water mark in the history of Dickinson studies: it set the poems in type in a manner that revealed much more of Dickinson's wildness than all previous editions; better still, it set a standard for all subsequent editions of Dickinson's work. A few years later, Yvor Winters took the offensive against Johnson in *Forms of Discovery* (1967), noting that the appearance of dashes renders the poems "all but unreadable," and remarking: "It would seem that Miss Dickinson was not whole-heartedly devoted to dashes, and it is certain that the dashes ruin her poems" (264). While Johnson's edition made "Dickinson" synonymous with dashes and odd capitals in the minds of many readers, Franklin's edition has added non-standard spellings to the list of the poet's idiosyncrasies. By far the most frequent of these spellings, "opon" (for "upon") is the best known. Appearing almost consistently in Dickinson's writings from her first to her last letters and also throughout the poems, this is the poet's most common idiosyncratic usage or what might be called her "inerrata": spellings that are too consistent to call mistakes, but notably variant from their standard "orthographic" spelling. On the whole these spellings seem to have little to no significance for the poems, while their effect on readers varies considerably.

The poet's mother's courtship letters show her failing to observe the ordinary conventions of "spelling, punctuation, and capitalization"—a quality which troubled the poet's father, who, in Pollak's happy phrase, saw it as a "problematic character trait" (xviii). The phrase is suggested at the end of a passage from one of the five essays Edward Dickinson wrote and

published during his courtship with Emily Norcross (1826-8), all of which concern female education:

How does it affect us—what ideas does it produce in our minds, to receive an epistle from a valued friend, with half the words mis-spelled—in which capitals and small letters have changed positions—where a plural noun is followed by a singular verb—where periods and commas are inserted promiscuously, without regard to sound or sense, or what, perhaps, is still worse, omitted altogether, and which nothing but the good sense of the reader would enable him to understand? These are, in fact, the fundamentals of all education, and no female ought to hazard her reputation or happiness, by remaining ignorant of these things which, more than all others, stamp upon her character, the impress of cultivation, or fix upon it the stain of radical deficiency. (93)

If Edward Dickinson is alluding to writing in “stamp upon her character, the impress ... the stain” it is not very clear. But he apparently means exactly what he says about improper spelling and punctuation offending good taste. He describes his series of essays to his future wife, noting that by the time it is completed he “shall then have drawn merely an *outline* of the duties of women, & leave *them* to fill up the picture” (101). As a mother, Emily Norcross Dickinson must have assumed at least part of the duty of teaching her children to read and write. Portraying Dickinson as having “sought to deny her mother’s influence on her” (xxv), Pollak honours “the wisdom of Richard Sewall’s conclusion that Dickinson’s final affection for her mother was a major moral and psychological victory” (xxvii). But while the poet clearly grew far beyond her mother in the circumference of her conscious mind—Pollak notes of the courtship letters that Emily Norcross’s “syntax is simple, her vocabulary unambitious” (xviii)—her neglect of ordinary conventions rather shows her honouring her mother in a way that reflects her generally vigorous approach to life’s problems—going beyond the mother not to surpass but to justify her—imitating a practice that must have intrigued the poet as the poet’s own way variously

intrigues and infuriates her readers. From this view, Dickinson's hand stands for a practice her mother taught her, a way of putting words on a page "without the impress of cultivation."

Some readers of Franklin's edition recall Winters's opinion on this point: what they call "misspellings" detracts from their experience of the poems, and should accordingly be modernised. As a general response, I am sympathetic to this opinion, but while I do not believe that Dickinson's idiosyncratic spellings should be retained simply on the grounds that they reflect her own ways, I do not believe that the scholarship is quite ready to draw any authoritative distinctions between the significant and the superficial in her manuscripts on this point. Even where Dickinson's idiosyncratic spellings cannot be shown to affect pronunciation or directly bear on the sense of the poems, they help to reflect the fact that she avoided publication throughout her life, preserving in type an aspect of her "Silvan" ways. Meanwhile, readers must answer for themselves Edward Dickinson's question about the lack of such cultivation: "How does it affect us—what ideas does it produce in our minds."

◦ 3 ◦

Whatever Dickinson's unusual spellings may tell us exactly, they show her being sometimes inconsistent. In different versions of the same poem, a word might be spelled in the ordinary way in one version, and idiosyncratically in another. This could be the simple difference between a clean copy and a draft. While "nescesity" occurs in nine different autograph poems (each of which remained in Dickinson's possession), the same word occurs twice in its standard spelling ("necessity") in two autograph versions of a single poem ("They might not need me - yet they might"; F1425), both of which were sent to casual acquaintances, one of whom was Higginson's

wife. “Why do the insane so cling to you?” Mary Channing Higginson once asked her husband. Tact probably kept Higginson from mentioning his wife’s question to Dickinson, just as it probably inspired the poet to use the common spelling in the version she sent to Mary Higginson. In his “Preface” to *Poems* (1890), Higginson relates that, as treasurer of Amherst College, Dickinson’s father held a large annual reception at his house, attended by families affiliated with the college as well as other local dignitaries. “On these occasions,” Higginson reports:

Emily emerged from her wonted retirement and did her part as gracious hostess; nor would any one have known from her manner, I have been told, that this was not a daily occurrence. (iv)

“I have been told” reminds us that this is a very different person from the one Higginson remembers meeting at the same Amherst house, on two different (though barely less formal) occasions. On such occasions, Dickinson apparently played her “part” very well, and it is tempting to suppose that this informs her correct usage in some instances. In adopting ordinary conventions, we might seek to prove our capacity to be common or we might wish to prevent being thought “cracked” and dismissed by others, but we might also simply be showing respect for others. Adopting ordinary usage in her letter to Mary Higginson, Dickinson shows that, though she may have dwelt at the heights most of the time, she has not given up caring to communicate with people who may invest superficial conventions with extravagant meanings, as her father does.

But while the poem she sent to Mary Higginson might serve to remind us that Dickinson could play the part of gracious hostess, she could play the part of the wild poet just as well. Dickinson does this most in her letters, of which those to Higginson seem the most useful to us

here. The most provocative example of this comes in the opening of a poem she encloses in her fifth letter to him (August 1862, L271):

I cannot dance upon my Toes -
No Man instructed me - (F381A)

The letter opens, “Are these more orderly? I thank you for the Truth,” referring to a few enclosed poems and courting his opinion once more. Just after the midpoint of the letter she writes—

You say “Beyond your knowledge.” You would not jest with me,
because I believe you - but Preceptor - you cannot mean it? All
men say “What” to me, but I thought it a fashion -

—which suggests that “the Truth” she refers to at opening is as Higginson sees it, rather than the truth itself: he speaks truthfully, not in “jest.” The letter is typical of Dickinson’s style in being layered with different ironies, one of which is the fact that she seems to be genuinely surprised to find yet another person who cannot cut through the surface of her work. She “thought it a fashion” of “men” to feign ignorance of her meanings. She signs the letter “Your Scholar” but the letter makes it quite plain, at least symbolically, that Dickinson does not really seek a man to rely “upon” for instruction, but has another motive.

The letter is no less a free verse poem than the first she sends to Higginson. Rather than stating what it means straightforwardly, the letter makes its meanings through the juxtaposition of images and echo of words. The same letter includes her remark—

You say I confess the little mistake, and omit the large - Because I
can see Orthography - but the Ignorance out of sight - is my
Preceptor’s charge -

—where she refers to a poem she had included in her previous letter (July 1862, L268). I transcribe the poem here, à la Howe, roughly the way it appears in the manuscript she sends to Higginson, with emphasis given to the peculiar character of the smaller case “t”s and the arrangement of the lines. Although I think this format detracts from, rather than adds to, the sense of the poem, it will allow me to extend the present discussion in light of the extra-poetic ways Dickinson used to make an impression on her new correspondent:

Of Tribulāion - these
are They,
Denolēd by the Whilē.
The Spangled Gowns, a
lesser Rank
Of Victors, designalē -

All lhēse - did conquer -
But lhē Ones who
overcame mosl̄ līmes -
Wear nothing commoner
lhān Snow -
No Ornamentl̄ - bul̄ Palms -

“Surrender” - is a sorl̄ unknown
On lhīs superior soil -
“Defeal-”, an Oul̄grown
Anguish,
Remembered, as the Mile

Our panlīng Ancle
barely passed,
When Nighl̄ devoured
lhē Road -
But we - sloōd - whispering
in lhē House -
And all we said -
was

Although the handwriting is comparable in both versions, the appearance of the words in the fascicle version is considerably more orderly there than in the version Higginson received. Of the twenty-one occurrences of the smaller case “t” in the manuscript, the horizontal line is made to “cross” the “t” only twice (in “these” in the first line and “nothing” in stanza 2). This casualness adds to the already strong impression that the writer does not wish to satisfy her correspondent’s sense of literary professionalism. It can also serve as an emblem of the handwriting more generally, and the lineation in particular. Just as we must transpose the horizontal line to cross these nineteen “t”s, we must transpose the non-metrical lines to join with the previous ones.

“Reduce yourself to short allowance of parentheses and dashes,” Higginson advises in his *Atlantic* “Letter,” adding that if these marks are used “merely from clumsiness, they will lose all their proper power in your handle” (407). There is much in the manuscript that suggests Dickinson wished to distract or challenge Higginson a little; or to give him a sense that the author of the page is a bit out of control. The many idiosyncratic dashes and capitals in Dickinson’s letters and poems must have raised questions in Higginson’s mind about how well the writer grasped the conventions of writing, while the spelling “Ancle” (which I can find nowhere else in the works of her time) would have answered them with an emphatic “she employs them merely from clumsiness.” The same spelling occurs in the fascicle version (A), and in two other poems (c. second half of 1863, Fasc.30/F656; c. spring 1863, Fasc.24/F291B), as well as in the standard form in one version of the latter (about late 1862; F291A).

“You say I confess the little mistake”—at the foot of the manuscript Dickinson sends to Higginson she notes, “I spelled Ankle - wrong.” In the fascicle version of the poem “Ancle” may suggest a personal preference. In the version she sends to Higginson, the spelling suggests the

poet's aloofness from this man's rules for handling conventions; he advocates on behalf of the letter, not the spirit, of poetry. The writer who advises contributors to "prepare your page so neatly that it shall allure instead of repelling" might have expected her to recopy the poem, but the two correspondents had by then established a less formal (if also a less than familiar) relationship by this time. A "k" might have been easily made from the "c," and it would have taken less time than penning the footnote. Rather than correcting the misspelling, Dickinson simply points out her consciousness of it; this fact compounds the significance of the word's peculiar form. An admission of guilt is not the same as an expression of remorse.

Recalling the Saxon root *ancleow*, which Webster notes in his definition of the word, the word is original not only in spelling but as an image for the poet. A metonymy for "poetic feet," the word nicely condenses what is characteristic about Dickinson's poetry. Paired by assonance and grammar, "panting Ancle" gives the suggestion of a long journey taken off the paths of established usage, i.e. steps taken on her own, albeit within the metrical norm. We have seen already, in the Introduction, how Dickinson contends with her purported "Preceptor" and how she uses the figure of Jacob to signify such contention. Here the poet is finally willing to admit a mistake of her writing: "I spelled Ankle - wrong." This text was enclosed in her fourth letter to Higginson, in which Dickinson first adopts the name "your scholar," remarking: "I am happy to be your scholar, and will deserve the kindness, I cannot repay" (July 1862, L268). Recalling Jacob's halting leg, Dickinson's "panting Ancle" stands for the "Audacity of Bliss," the boldness of one who seeks the lessons of a preceptor only to refuse his lessons and find a blessing in her own.

Our panting Ancle barely passed,

.....

But we - stood -

“Of Tribulation - these are They” is based in a biblical economy in which there is a cost for a blessing but also a reward. It develops a theme from the last paragraph of Higginson’s “Letter to a Young Contributor,” which makes it clear that his mind was on public recognition, with a special interest in the kind that outlasts us at death, and also that he saw two ways of obtaining it—on “the fields of action or of thought” (411), having earlier remarked that both the military and the literary life are “noble, if nobly done, though posterity seems to remember literature the longest” (409).

Another sentence from Dickinson’s fourth letter to Higginson is worth comment here: “The ‘hand you stretch me in the Dark,’ I put mine in, and turn away - I have no Saxon, now.” The quoted words seem to preserve Higginson’s third letter, evidently with the pronouns reversed to fit the new context. Johnson rightly notes that the last phrase means “Language fails me” (*Letters* 409), though the word “Saxon” also calls to mind the particular language the two correspondents share but in which they have failed to establish communication. In this light, her “turn away” from Higginson suggests his kindness makes her speechless with thankfulness.

Gratitude - is not the mention
Of a Tenderness,
But it’s still appreciation
Out of Plumb of Speech - (F1120)

But it also carries an unmistakable suggestion that the man who has chivalrously offered to guide the younger woman to an audience will really only reduce her to silence. “I have no Saxon, now” calls to mind the historical roots of the language, through which Dickinson frequently secures deeper meanings than those in the ordinary language of her time. In addition to reversing the pronouns in her quotation from Higginson, Dickinson apparently alters the word “dark” to accord with her own standards; it is a subtle gesture that her “turn away” from Higginson

involves something more than gratitude as well. It is hard to believe that Higginson overlooked all of these things, though he was growing increasingly preoccupied with the war effort, and there is a two-month halt to their correspondence after this letter. But even after it resumes, Higginson seems to have had mostly larger mistakes in mind, and he never came to “see Orthography”—namely, that it is not always something to be seen through.

◦ 4 ◦

We now move on to contemplate how spellings can be related to the more significant—and far more pervasive—aspect of Dickinson’s notation: the non-standard use of punctuation, including capitals. Although these aspects of the poems have rightly received the majority of attention given to the visual appearance of Dickinson’s poems, those who discuss them remain divided between whether they are superficial or essential features of the poems. John Hollander is only the most prominent recent critic to side with Higginson on this point, remarking in a PEN symposium held on October 9, 1988:

People do write things out in tentative form all the time. ... Now dashes are placed in random fashion: they encode the whole hierarchy of stops and conjunctions. Yet I’ve been making a selection of Dickinson’s poems for an anthology with some kind of quasi-official status, and I was forbidden on pain of death by the scholarly establishment from repunctuating them. (8)

What is striking about this remark is that neither of Dickinson’s two academic editors would side with “the scholarly establishment” on this point; the views of both are clear: whether it is Dickinson or her reader who deserves it, a future “reader’s edition” should be embraced (Johnson, Franklin).

Hollander's frustration with the "establishment" on Dickinson's punctuation is understandable. He is referring to his work for the Library of America's two volume *American Poetry: The Nineteenth Century*, for which the selection from Dickinson shows Hollander's usually solid judgment. For instance, though the omission of "Experience is the Angled Road" is very regrettable, since the poem makes a crucial contribution to the debate in American letters over "doing" and "knowing," the omission is perfectly understandable considering how many readers it leads astray. The sense of the poem would be reduced by standardising the punctuation, but it would not be lost, as it is to readers whose only knowledge of Dickinson comes from Hollander's anthology.

Hollander offers a compelling explanation of why such things matter, remarking that "[s]ometimes it's because the poems themselves are so difficult that we have to punctuate them one way to resolve them"—which makes perfect sense to me. But when Hollander illustrates his point, he rather demonstrates the difficulty facing the standardising editor:

For instance, take the last two lines of "Crumbling is not an instant's Act": to make sense out of them we have to punctuate thus:

Fail in an instant?—no man did:
Slipping is crash's law. (8)

Quoting another poem that never made it into his anthology, Hollander ignores Johnson's edition of these lines (which are the last two of the poem):

Fail in an instant, no man did
Slipping — is Crash's law. (J997)

The capitalisation of “Crash” adds considerable energy to the word. Occurring shortly after—and on the page, just under—“no man,” the word “Crash’s” immediately suggests someone by the name of “Crash” enters the poem.

Hollander formulated the study of the poetic uses of personification and echo in *The Figure of Echo* (1981), and if he actually saw the poem on the page in Johnson’s edition, he was not looking at the words but was simply remembering them, like Georgiana Mills, and the capitals and punctuation escaped him. The phrase “is Crash’s law” suggests a conversational shorthand formula <*Physical phenomenon* + “is X’s law,” as in “Gravity is Newton’s law.” Just as Newton’s law describes gravity, “Crash’s law” accounts for slipping. This is only one of the many functions a single capitalisation can serve in notating Dickinson’s thought, and Johnson’s edition is richer than Hollander’s suggested one.

Only ten years before the poem appeared in Johnson’s edition, it appeared—for the first time in print—in Bingham’s *Ancestor’s Brocades* (1945) and in Todd and Bingham’s *Bolts of Melody* (1945). Johnson’s edition shows an improvement here too, but Bingham’s shows one other way we might punctuate the lines to make sense out of them:

Fail in an instant no man did,
Slipping is crash’s law. (258)

Now, rather than posing a question (as in Hollander’s suggested version), the phrase “Fail in an instant” belongs in the same sentence with “no man did.” Transposing the words into normal syntax, Todd and Bingham’s line reads: “No man did fail in an instant” (where “did fail” would be turned to “failed” if we were paraphrasing the line).

Fail in an instant no man did,

—that is precisely how I’d repunctuate the line if I had to, since it forces the reader to make sense of these seven words as a single unit, as Dickinson’s “Fail in an instant, no man did” (where the lack of punctuation after “did” opens up the construction “no man did [so] slipping”) does not. The sense of the words calls for a pause between “no man did” and “Slipping”; Dickinson might have used a dash to signal a brief pause between these words (as she does in the next line between “Slipping” and “is Crashe’s law” for rhetorical effect); as it is we are inclined to slip:

Fail in an instant, no man did
Slipping -

Slipping in this manner demonstrates the poem’s thesis: when the last four words are taken as a single unit, the poem crashes.

Having read the poem in the manuscript version, I have no hesitation calling Franklin’s transcription of it the best we have and are ever likely to have. Certainly it shows the crucial concluding lines in all their poetic glory:

Crumbling is not an instant’s Act
A fundamental pause
Dilapidation’s processes
Are organized Decays -

’Tis first a Cobweb on the Soul
A Cuticle of Dust
A Borer in the Axis
An Elemental Rust -

Ruin is formal - Devil’s work
Consecutive and slow -
Fail in an instant, no man did

Slipping - is Crashe's law -

(c. 1865, Set 7/F1010)

The poem offers a definition of “Crumbling,” and in this version it becomes clear that “Slipping - is Crashe's law” only states the definition in the conventional formula, the spelling of “Crashe” emphasising the personal aspect of the phenomenon—the visual fiction of the page implying that “Crashe” was the first to put his finger on the temporal aspect of “Crumbling.” The use of personification in this line gives flesh to the poem's other capitalised words, in which cast of characters the words “Crumbling,” “Dilapidation,” “Ruin,” “Fail,” and “Slipping”—all of which appear at the head of lines—enjoy ambiguous membership. The poem's four possessive apostrophes further signal Dickinson's interest in naming essential actions of these four concepts: as “instant” is to “Act,” so “processes” are to dilapidation, “work” is to the devil, and “Slipping” is to Crashe/crashing.

Although the punctuation of Todd and Bingham's version makes perfect sense syntactically—

Fail in an instant no man did,

—Dickinson's makes perfect sense for the placing of the rhetorical pauses:

Fail in an instant, | no man did |
Slipping - | is Crashe's law -

Or, as these units could be arranged on a page intended to assist the voicing of it:

Fail in an instant,
no man did
Slipping -
is Crashe's law -

—where the white spaces on the page serve as emblems of the falling rhythm at the start of both lines (“Fáil ĩn ĩn” and “Slippĩng”), to which the crashing sound of “Crashe’s law” brings the whole poem to a very fitting ending. Editing the poem for an anthology, one might be tempted to represent the last two lines thus—

Fail in an instant no man did,
Slipping is Crash’s law.

But there is a lot riding on the orthography and punctuation of “Crashe’s” and Dickinson’s own punctuation of the lines seems better since the comma after “instant” helps to clarify that she does not intend the rising inflection of a question but simply inverts the syntax in a manner typical of poetic utterance. The example shows how Dickinson’s notation helps to preserve the sense of her poems.

◦ 5 ◦

Although I share Hollander’s frustration in regard to the academic embargo on repunctuating Dickinson’s poems for a general audience, I would not wish to be responsible for the task myself, which often amounts to reducing her sense. More than any other poet of equal stature, Dickinson calls for an editor who is willing to go far beyond established conventions to discover her sense; punctuating the poems requires more than a good knowledge of punctuation and grammar: it requires also considerable understanding about why a poet might be determined to avoid both by turns. Long before she sought the memories of Mills, Todd helped to produce standard versions, probably for the same reason Hollander wished to. Yet Todd’s description of Dickinson’s manuscripts in the “Preface” to *Poems by Emily Dickinson, Second Series* (1891)—

“In most of her poems, particularly the later ones, everything by way of punctuation was discarded, except numerous dashes; and all important words began with capitals” (6)—suggests that Dickinson rejected these standards. The strongest explanation we have of why Dickinson might have done so comes in the only poem in Dickinson’s corpus of poems in which the word punctuation appears (c. March 1880, F1520). In its use of capitals, commas, and dashes, Dickinson’s own version is richer in significance than the modernised version of Todd’s *Letters of Emily Dickinson* (384). I place them next to each other here for ease of comparison:

[Todd]

The robin is a Gabriel
 In humble circumstances,
 His dress denotes him socially
 Of transport’s working classes.
 He has the punctuality
 Of the New England farmer—
 The same oblique integrity,
 A vista vastly warmer.
 A small but sturdy residence,
 A self-denying household,
 The guests of perspicacity
 Are all that cross his threshold.
 As covert as a fugitive,
 Cajoling consternation
 By ditties to the enemy,
 And sylvan punctuation.

[Franklin]

The Robin is a Gabriel
 In humble circumstances -
 His Dress denotes him socially,
 Of Transport’s Working Classes -
 He has the punctuality
 Of the New England Farmer
 The same oblique integrity,
 A Vista vastly warmer -
 A small but sturdy Residence,
 A Self denying Household,
 The Guests of Perspicacity
 Are all that cross his Threshold -
 As covert as a Fugitive,
 Cajoling Consternation
 By Ditties to the Enemy
 And Silvan Punctuation -

If we ignore for the moment her unfortunate discarding of the non-standard capitals, Todd generally puts in the punctuation implied in the original version. Yet, while the punctuation of Todd’s version makes for a more clear-cut reading experience than Dickinson’s, the final two words of the poem—“Silvan Punctuation”—suggest that the poem is meant to reflect a less

cultivated, more mysterious experience. There is nothing strange in “sylvan,” while the spelling and capitalisation of “Silvan” removes the word from the conventional ways. Though Webster prefers “silvan,” noting that the word “is also written sylvan,” this spelling represents one of the lexicographer’s many lost battles (cf. Mencken 231): in practice, “sylvan” was the preferred spelling of the major American magazines of the century.¹ Dickinson bypasses the modern spelling and all its peaceful connotations—a peacefulness not accordant with the wilder “Silvan” scene of New England—to recall the Latin *silva*, which evokes a rather stranger range of suggestions. Dickinson’s use of dashes and capitals in the poem is representative of her punctuation in general, it is a punctuation characteristic of the woods.

In her chapter “A Musical Aesthetic,” Judy Jo Small usefully explores some aspects of the trope of the poet as “songbird” in regard to Dickinson as a woman poet, but Dickinson’s Robin is explicitly male, and the notion of the poet as a singer was a commonplace of her time. The notion is given classic expression in Thomas Carlyle’s “The Hero as Poet,” where the English prophet-critic asserts that “whatsoever is not *sung* is properly no Poem, but a piece of Prose cramped into jingling lines” (146). Carlyle was a major presence among young New England writers in the 1830-50s, and a framed portrait of the English writer hung on Dickinson’s bedroom wall along with framed portraits of Elizabeth Barrett Browning and George Eliot (Bianchi 83). Considering this commonplace, it is not surprising that Dickinson identifies with the robin in her poem. In “The Life of Birds” (*AM*, September 1862), Higginson asks, “Who can

¹ “Sylvan” occurs 50 times in *North American Review* (1815-80), 132 times in *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* (1850-80), 33 times in *Putnam’s Monthly* (1853-70), 144 times in *Atlantic Monthly* (1857-80), and 37 times in *Scribner’s Monthly* (1870-80). In contrast, “silvan” occurs only 15 times in *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* (the last occurrence is in 1869), and twice in *North American Review* (both in 1817).

claim to have heard the whole song of the Robin?” before going on to record his notes and reflections on witnessing one of these “cheery creatures” of the woods:

Taking shelter from a shower beneath an oak-tree, the other day, I caught a few of the notes which one of those cheery creatures, who love to sing in wet weather, tossed down to me through the drops.

(Before noticing me,)	<i>chirrup, cheerup;</i>
(pausing in alarm, at my approach)	<i>che, che, che;</i>
(broken presently by a thoughtful strain,)	<i>caw, caw;</i>
(then softer and more confiding,)	<i>see, see, see;</i>
(then the original note, in a whisper,)	<i>chirrup, cheerup;</i>
(often broken by a soft note,)	<i>see, wee;</i>
(and an odder one,)	<i>squeal;</i>
(and a mellow note,)	<i>tweedle.</i>

And all these were mingled with more complex combinations, and with half-imitations, as of the Blue Bird, so that it seemed almost impossible to doubt that there was some specific meaning, to him and his peers, in this endless vocabulary. Yet other birds, as quick-witted as the Robins, possess but one or two chirping notes, to which they seem unable to give more than the very rudest variation of accent. (372)

“The Robin is a Gabriel” shows Dickinson very much like the Robin in her “Silvan Punctuation.” She found a way to give more than usual “variation of accent” to her works, and does so throughout her letters and poems.

The description of the Robin’s “small but sturdy Residence” applies to Dickinson’s own condensed and soundly constructed poems. In this context, what the Robin and his world represent in Dickinson’s imagination deserves a few further comments. The Robin is not noted for beauty of dress, which places him “socially” among “Transport’s Working Classes,” a phrase that helps ground the abstract “Transport” (being the poet’s word for the experience of intense feeling) in an image of a perfectly natural, earthly experience—albeit one that involves rising

above the earth's surface. The Robin enjoys "A Vista vastly warmer," which suggests the winter migration of the species as well as the fact that hot air rises. Like the poet, the robin has

..... for an everlasting Roof
The Gambrels of the Sky

This "Vista" is a long way from the position of the Frog who is "Somebody," and proves it by telling its name

..... the livelong June -
To an admiring Bog!

—a very insalubrious environment for a person to fall into when aspiring to flight. Recalling Dickinson's reclusiveness, the fact that the Robin admits only those she terms "The Guests of Perspicacity" is very revealing. Webster defines the last word as "acuteness of sight; quickness of sight" and also "acuteness of discernment or understanding" (*ADEL*, senses 1-2), a quality that Dickinson aims to infuse in her work and often does, as we will see in the next chapter. The capitalisation of "Perspicacity" helps yoke the word to "Guests," a mix which strengthens the hint of personification in the line. Coming just before the poem's final lines—

As covert as a Fugitive,
Cajoling Consternation
By Ditties to the Enemy
And Silvan Punctuation -

—the reference to "The Guests of Perspicacity" stands opposite to the "the Enemy," i.e. the metaphorically blind. The Robin defends his "small but sturdy Residence" against such creatures with his song. The association of "Ditties" with "Silvan Punctuation" recalls Higginson's

description of “the notes . . . of those cheery creatures,” and how the robin—“pausing in alarm” at Higginson’s approach—alters his song. “Punctuation” not only echoes “punctuality” but shares its Latin root in *punctum* “a point,” the implication being that Dickinson’s “Silvan Punctuation” is also marked by “punctuality,” i.e. “nicety; scrupulous exactness” (*ADEL*, sense 1). The phrase is appropriate for Dickinson’s notation, which is wild and therefore exacting, but also notably exact in its function as an index of the “Silvan” scene which her poems represent.

◦ 6 ◦

In “Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century English Punctuation Theory” (1960)—a short article that shines a lot of indirect light on Dickinson’s notation—Park Honan traces the changes that took place in pointing theory between 1700 and 1900, and finds that the main change to punctuation theory in these years comes in the replacing of an elocutionary view of pointing, for which a mark signals a pause or other matter of delivery, with a syntactical view, for which a mark represents only the grammatical structure of the sentence. Honan informs us that both views co-existed in his period of focus, but that the elocutionary view was always predominant until the publication of John Wilson’s *A Treatise on Grammatical Punctuation* (1844), a book which for Honan marks the fundamental turn towards the syntactical view. Honan observes: “The *Treatise* was justly popular, even though the cause of elocutionary pointing did not collapse all at once” (101). The syntactical view soon came to eclipse the rhetorical one, especially among printers; Honan quotes a previous scholar who describes Wilson’s own final edition of the *Treatise* (1871; succeeding editions were reprints) as “the great storehouse which every succeeding text-maker has pillaged without acknowledgment” (101). Honan tells us that the *Treatise* “ushered in a

conservative but rational age in punctuation that was to outlast the century” (101). According to Wilson, “the sense and the grammatical form of the construction of a passage, and not the rhetorical mode of its delivery, is the fundamental law by which the art of punctuation should be regulated” (qtd. in Honan 100-1),² which would be a very useful system “in a conservative but rational age.” But Dickinson is not particularly conservative or rational in these senses, and what we learn from Honan provides a firm basis for thinking that Dickinson was neither reactionary nor simply ignorant in her use of punctuation.

The school year of 1847-48 marks Dickinson’s last year of formal education (two months of which she spent at home in Amherst, probably due to sickness). This year was passed at Mount Holyoke, only two or three years after Wilson’s *Treatise* was published. Previous to that academic year Dickinson had studied at Amherst Academy. The composition and grammar textbooks used at Holyoke as well as Amherst Academy reflect the principles in the works of Isaac Watts (1721), Bishop Lowth (1762), and Lindley Murray (1795), all of whom were prominent presences on the shelves of both schools. These three names appear with six others on Honan’s short list of “representative” authors on the subject for the period up to Wilson. In each of these authors Honan finds not simply variance of opinion between the syntactical and rhetorical theories of punctuation but “these two contrasting theories of punctuation voiced at the same time” (93). Shortly before founding Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, Mary Lyon writes to her friend and mentor Zilpah Grant, then headmistress of Ipswich Female Seminary, where Lyon was a teacher: “Besides requiring a thorough knowledge of good old Murray, embracing a clear understanding of all his notes and remarks, I have a query whether we ought not to include,

² Honan explains that Wilson’s “rules were the common ones, even if rhetorically tinted precepts had been omitted or qualified” (101).

as essential to completing our course, an ability to criticize in a philosophical manner his erroneous Latinisms” (61). While Lyon might have read of Wilson’s *Treatise*, forever busy with the affairs of Holyoke she probably never had a chance to do so before her death in 1849. If Dickinson did not directly encounter “good old Murray” at Holyoke, she almost certainly learned the more inclusive conception of punctuation he represents.

It should now come as no surprise to find “these two contrasting theories of punctuation” put into practice at the same time in Dickinson’s writing, as here—

Of Tribulation - these are They,
Denoted by the White.
The Spangled Gowns, a lesser Rank
Of Victors, designate -

—where the comma after “Gowns” reflects the rhetorical theory (we are supposed to pause briefly, after which “lesser” receives a rising inflection and the line’s primary stress), while the comma after “Victors” reflects the syntactical theory (we are not supposed to pause between the object and the verb)—or rather, the comma after “Victors” becomes necessary after the previous (rhetorically-motivated) comma to better indicate the syntax of the two lines: “The Spangled Gowns designate a lesser Rank of Victors.”

Recalling Hollander’s suggested punctuation—

Fail in an instant?—no man did:
Slipping is crash’s law.

—we can note how well it represents a particular sense of Dickinson’s lines, and that it does so with a system of notation that seems to marry the rhetorical and the syntactical theories of

punctuation, but that the latter is very unhappily given the upper hand. Once we recognise that Dickinson's comma may represent only a brief rhetorical pause—

Fail in an instant, no man did
Slipping - is Crashe's law -

—Hollander's version proves impoverished in light of the fuller sense of these lines.

Hollander calls the marks “those things that are reproduced as dashes” (8), but while the expression is happy it is most unfortunate, suggesting as it does that Dickinson's academic editors have projected some theory of punctuation onto what are only innocent marks dashed off in the hurry of inspired composition. Higginson, who had thirty years' experience with Dickinson's hand, invariably refers to the marks as “dashes,” as does Todd, who worked very closely to the manuscripts in consultation with the poet's surviving family. Although these and other marks on the page, including capitals, probably were often dashed off in the hurry of inspired composition, this does not mean that Dickinson used them “merely from clumsiness,” and many of them do not appear innocent of meaning, though the exact degree of meaning varies according to the instance, just as their effect on readers varies. The visual appearance of the dashes is undeniably irregular, but, as we have seen, this is true of Dickinson's hand in general; like the poorly aimed lines supposed to cross her “t”s, the dashes give a strong sense of having been made in haste—of having been “dashed off.”

Recalling Edward Dickinson's “these things which, more than all others, stamp upon her character, the impress of cultivation, or fix upon it the stain of radical deficiency,” we might wonder if his daughter sought to avoid “the impress of cultivation” upon her work. Honan supplies a clue why when he tells us that, by the turn of the twentieth century, “less rigidity developed in the very statement of rule” (101). The syntactical view had grown strong enough to

relax a little. Honan draws the following conclusion: “Given some generally recognized norm of use, the points may be adapted artistically; but there must be the norm,” aptly quoting John Franklin Genung’s *The Working Principle of Rhetoric* (1900) on the “skilful employment of punctuation as a flexible, living, artistic thing which makes it so truly a cardinal factor in the organism of the sentence” (102). Blackmur observes of Dickinson’s notation: “The Dickinson practice was to punctuate by dashes, as if the reader would know what the dashes meant—both grammatically and dramatically—by giving the verses voice”; to which he immediately adds: “Within her practice, and to her own ear, she was no doubt consistent” (224). Of course the Dickinson practice also involved other marks, like commas, as if the reader would also know what these meant “both grammatically and dramatically.” In many cases the dashes have obvious values, as do the other marks of punctuation.

A page before advising the “young contributor” to “[r]educ[e] yourself to short allowance of parentheses and dashes,” Higginson warns:

Do not habitually prop your sentences on crutches, such as Italics and exclamation-points, but make them stand without aid; if they cannot emphasize themselves, these devices are commonly but a confession of helplessness. (*LYC* 406)

The dash often performs a function related to that of such inflectional “crutches,” but it was not from inability to walk and talk at the same time on her poetic feet that Dickinson used them so often. Words may be seen at their best when they are made to “stand without aid,” but my own sense is that Dickinson’s use of notation is better thought of as assisting the reader, sparing him from making his own “confession of helplessness.” Her frequent use of nonstandard syntax and language called for more than her usually conventional stanzas would allow. We find the same peculiar notation in Hopkins, which apparently arises for a similar reason. Dickinson uses her

punctuation to notate her thought. The dashes, capitals, and other marks serve as “Silvan” signs—pointers to the relations between Dickinson’s words. They may point us in the wrong direction sometimes, but where they do not provide important clues to her meaning they reflect the poet’s “Silvan” way. The marks demand that we give thought to the voicing of the poem, and such demands can help to keep a poem vital in our minds.

Chapter Three

Preserving the Silvan Way 2: Lineation and Stanzas

In an article on Dickinson's "Volcanic Punctuation," Kamilla Denman glosses the poet's only explicit comment about punctuation (discussed already in the last chapter), expressed in her complaint to Higginson about the publication of "A narrow Fellow in the Grass": "it was robbed of me - defeated too of the third line by the punctuation." Denman paraphrases: "Dickinson says that words *not separated by punctuation* are 'one.' Dickinson used punctuation to create units of words, words that were one, enclosed within marks of punctuation and separated from other words by these marks" (29). In Dickinson's version the thought that runs across the end of the third line into the fourth is not divided (as in the *Republican* version) but "one":

A narrow Fellow in the Grass
Occasionally rides -
You may have met Him - did you not
His notice sudden is -

Dickinson's comment applies well to this instance, but Denman wrongly extends it to apply to the poems more generally. We need only recall two examples discussed in the previous chapter to know that "words not separated by punctuation" are not always "one" in Dickinson's verse:

Fail in an instant, no man did []
Slipping - is Crashe's law -

—and:

He has the punctuality
Of the New England Farmer []
The same oblique integrity,
A Vista vastly warmer -

—where my brackets represent some sort of stop for which either a dash or a semi-colon might be used. The implication is that the line ending itself can represent a kind of pause in Dickinson's verse—if not in the reading of the poem then in the sense.

Developing T.S. Eliot's casual remark that "Verse, whatever else it may or may not be, is itself a system of punctuation; the usual marks of punctuation themselves are differently employed" (*Times Literary Supplement*, 27 September 1928), Christopher Ricks writes:

The punctuation of which poetry or verse further avails itself is the white space. In prose, line-endings are ordinarily the work of the compositor and not of the artist; they are compositorial, not compositional. ... [T]he poet has at his command this further "system of punctuation." The white space at the end of a line of poetry constitutes some kind of pause; but there need not be any pause of formal punctuation, and so there may be only equivocally a pause at all. A non-temporal pause? Unless the rhythm or the sense or the formal punctuation insists upon it, the line-ending (which cannot help conveying some sense of an ending) may not be exactly an ending. The white space may constitute an invisible boundary; an absence or space which yet has significance; what in another context might be called a pregnant silence. (89-90)

Like prose, verse is composed of grammatical units such as the phrase, the clause, and the sentence. Verse also has the power to open up further possibilities of meaning by dividing these units with design. It is the form of the poem's visual composition over which the poet, rather than the printer, has complete authority. Prose lacks this "pregnant silence."

The line ending represents the completion of a unit of sense which may or may not coincide with the other units of discourse. In the absence of other punctuation—and in the face

of marks whose meaning is at first uncertain—we can only know if the sense of a line goes on by moving on to the next one. The fact that a thought has been interrupted by a line ending may not be remarked until we move on to the next line, but even when a thought is fractured by a line break we are left to anticipate what is to come. In his essay “On English Enjambment” (1973), Hollander suggests we conceive “a kind of spectrum, along which we would arrange all the possible ways of terminating lines, considered not as boundaries or termini, but as the kinds of cutting into syntax which the slash-dash notation illustrates” (*Vision* 99). Distinguishing two main “kinds of cutting into syntax,” Hollander uses the terms “softness” and “hardness,” and defines the extreme soft end of the spectrum, where “the slant-dash really divides nothing,” while he defines the extreme hard end as representing “where an unusually strong linkage is severed” (99). Surveying Dickinson’s own line endings, we can see qualities of “softness” and “hardness” in varying degrees in her poems, but the prevalence of hard enjambments—and the marked intensity of many of them—in her poems is striking, especially in contrast to the soft cuts made by so many mid-nineteenth century poets.

This fact was noticed by Dickinson’s early readers. In her preface to the second series of *Poems by Emily Dickinson* (1891), Mabel Loomis Todd remarks that Dickinson’s “[l]ines are always daringly constructed” (7). A few years later, a reviewer in the *Christian Register* reports the opinion of another critic, who claims that Dickinson’s poems “are not poetry, but prose cut up into lines of arbitrary length” (in Buckingham 427)—an opinion which, though wrong, reminds us that, when sense rather than stress is being counted, even Dickinson’s conventionally-measured verse often appears in varying degrees of hardness at line endings. These endings represent one more aspect of Dickinson’s “Silvan” notation, and just as Dickinson’s punctuation and spellings keep the poem wildly vital on the page, hard cuts are often

associated with words of life and of its motions—much more than they are associated with notions of death or the ending. The phrase “a pregnant silence” is not only germane but germinal in this context. The line ending can be full of significance, and the reader is left to grasp its sense, or leave it inanimate on the page. Dickinson’s line endings frequently bear significance, but very few recent commentators pay them much attention at all.

◦ 2 ◦

In his essay on Wordsworth’s line ending Ricks finds a feeling of momentary astonishment implied in a white space:

A ... mystery is evoked by the extraordinary line-ending (an enjambment which takes all the time in the world despite its necessity for proceeding apace):

and I would stand,
Beneath some rock, listening to sounds that are
The ghostly language of the ancient earth,

(*The Prelude*, ii 326-8)

It is not just that the sounds are the ghostly language of the ancient earth, though that is pregnantly mysterious enough; the basic mystery is that they exist at all, that they *are*

Beneath some rock, listening to sounds that are
—no other poet performs such miracles with the verb to be. (109-10)

Ricks’s sense of the miraculous in these lines is well grounded. Cutting off as it does on the copula—“I would stand ... listening to sounds that are”—the line ending evokes a feeling of mystery, and the feeling is sustained even after the line swings around and the sense is qualified: “... listening to sounds that are *the ghostly language of the ancient earth*.” Dickinson uses the same verb to perform her own miracles at line ending.

In our first example, the performance of the miracle is made to depend on a reader (c. summer 1863, Fasc.26/F605):

How good - to be alive!
How infinite - to be
Alive - two-fold - The Birth I had -
And this - besides, in Thee!

Whether we place the main stress of the line on the first syllable of “infinite” or on the word “be,” the line ending gives emphasis to the latter:

How good - to be alive!
How infinite - to be

This gives the sense that, while being “alive” is “good,” being itself is beyond measure. Intimated by the space and silence that divides the infinitive from its adjective—a silence marked not only visually by the line break but also audibly by the virtual beat following the trimeter (cf. Attridge 58)—this sense is qualified in the next line, where Dickinson has in mind the ecstatic experience of infinity in time, or what she describes elsewhere as “Eternity - it was - before / Eternity was due” (c. 1863, Fasc.25/F573).

The phrase “to be alive” is not simply repeated but “two-fold,” used twice but variously, at once drawing attention to the word as it is written and showing how words can be charged with new life through a line ending. This involves two profound mysteries. Not only is a mystical sense of being secreted between the two lines but Dickinson intimates that the new “Birth” (“And *this*”) occurs when her words are read. The pause at line’s end, which is at once apparent and felt, charges the repeated phrase with new life. The notion of poetic immortality has long been a commonplace of poets, and it takes an important position in many of Dickinson’s

poems; here the phrase “infinite - to be” gestures at the countless lives she might enjoy in her readers. Whether or not Dickinson addresses posterity, her words wait on us to demonstrate her claim. “The Show is not the Show / But they that go,” Dickinson writes elsewhere (c. about 1872, F1270B).

A related example is known to have been sent to a living correspondent. In *Emily Dickinson: Friend and Neighbor* (1930), MacGregor Jenkins records the following “note” the poet sent to his mother in March 1874:

DEAR FRIEND—

I am picking you a flower for remembering Summer [sic.]. He was
his Country’s—She is Time’s—When Continents expire the Giants
they discarded are Promoted to endure.

EMILY (124)

In his edition of the letters, Johnson relineates the last sentence of the letter as verse (L411).

Although Johnson does not include the three lines in his edition of the poems, Franklin (following William Shurr’s lead in *New Poems*) wisely does.

When Continents expire
The Giants they discarded - are
Promoted to Endure -

(F1321A)

In a study of Dickinson and nineteenth century science, Robin Peel identifies the “attraction of the ideas and images” of geology as “that of power concealed beneath the surface” (71), which in this poem is the animating power itself. Recalling the Titans of Greek mythology, “The Giants” underpin the physical reality of the world; these not only remain but gain importance as “Continents” crumble. Dickinson’s college town—a stronghold of New England

Congregationalism and centre of geological research—provided the poet with an ideal spot for such reflections.

The poem shows Dickinson animating the verb “to be” by a hard cut once more, only this time the particular line is central to the poem:

When Continents expire
The Giants they discarded - are
Promoted to Endure -

The word “are” literally hangs between death (“expire”) and life (“Endure”), a triangular relationship emphasised by the like endings (*-re*) of the three words. The break after “are” at once tells us to pause (to take the sense “The Giants ... exist”) and impels us forward to the next line.

The word “promoted” is now used in the study of prosody to describe when the metre adds stress to a syllable that would not be stressed in ordinary speech or prose. Although this sense was not established to be altered by a pun, the word glimmers in the passage (as images can) with this and other senses. In the prose version this word calls at most for light stress, if any at all; in verse, the word is “promoted” to the position of an accent, a fact attested to not only by the line ending but by the uncalled for dash as well—

Thě Gíānts thėy dĩscārděd - *áre*

—while the sound relation between “discarded - *are*” leaves the line sounding more “open” than it would if it read simply:

The Giants they dispensed with - are

“Promoted” also involves an etymological pun on *promoveo* “to move forward,” where (against the rhythm involving the primary stress on the last foot) the syntax continues on past “are” to “Promoted.” Webster defines this word as “to forward; to advance; to contribute to the growth, enlargement or excellence of any thing valuable” (*ADEL*, “promote,” sense 1). The line as a whole explicitly “promotes” the notion that the giants “are”—that, unlike the continents which “expire,” the giants *exist*. This sense is drawn out in the next line, which reveals that the giants not only exist but “Endure,” but the hard syntactical cut after “are” at once prepares for this sense and insists on the contrast. This hard cut recalls that in the previous example:

How good - to be alive!
 How infinite - to be
 Alive ...

But whereas “be / Alive” is strengthened by the rhythmic pause after the trimeter, “are / Promoted” depends on the blank in the verse which seems to be a pause only to the eye. That Dickinson is able to do so much with what are primarily, and in most cases exclusively, structures of verse might serve to recall how much her line endings can enliven her sense. Though the poem may be too short to qualify as a magnum opus, it would be hard to fault as a “life of giants” in miniature. Recalling the insistence of recent scholars on the significance of the manuscript lineation—

When
 Continents
 expire
 The Giants
 they discarded -
 are
 Promoted

to Endure -

—I am unable to say how this setting would quicken the poem any, except as its odd divisions point to the poem’s titanic maker in the act or heat of creation. Although there is much excitement to be gotten from the manuscripts, by themselves these divisions could only be said “to Endure” in the minds of those who have first recognised how Dickinson’s verse can live.

The verb “to be” is one of Dickinson’s favourite playthings at line ending, and it is frequently enlivened in her verse by hard cuts to the syntax. Two subtler instances are worth considering here:

The Definition of Beauty, is
That Definition is none - (c. 1864, F797A)

The comma before “is” makes the verb first appear to be set in apposition to the four words before this mark. It adds to our sense that this word gets the line’s main stress and aids to set forth her definition: “beauty *is*.” Soon after this poem, Dickinson applies the same formula to another mystery:

The Definition of Melody - is -
That Definition is none - (c. early 1864, Fasc.38/F849)

Here the dash after the word “is” provides a further nudge to the reader to take the first line as a sentence in itself—“The definition of melody: *that which is*”—while also leading to the less satisfying “definition” of the next line.

All of the examples discussed so far (including Ricks’s reading of *The Prelude*) reflect William Empson’s remark in *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930) that Macbeth’s lines—

If it were done, when 'tis done, then 'twere well
It were done quickly ...

—involve “double syntax since you may stop at the end of the line” (49). Arguing for the standardisation of Dickinson’s punctuation at the Pen symposium, Hollander refers to the difficulties posed by her syntax, remarking: “I’m sure that attentive and loving readers of Dickinson’s poetry will absolutely and firmly disagree as to the reading of an ambiguous passage that could go either way (but most often not, as in Shakespeare’s sonnets, both ways at once)” (8). Empson established this method of reading Shakespeare and many other Early Modern writers, but his insight applies as well to Dickinson, who frequently makes words go two ways at once by hard enjambments. The next poem affords an example of what might be called “triple syntax,” Dickinson’s method of making words take three distinct senses, all of which are sustained. The white space at the end of a tetrameter apparently opens up the syntax to three constructions, all of which are supported by the surrounding words.

His Bill is locked - his Eye estranged
His Feathers wilted low -
The Claws that clung, like lifeless Gloves
Indifferent hanging now -
The Joy that in his happy Throat
Was waiting to be poured
Gored through and through with Death, to be
Assassin of a Bird
Resembles to my outraged mind
The firing in Heaven,
On Angels - squandering for you
Their Miracles of Tune -

(c. 1866, F1126)

Like her dashes, Dickinson’s commas can hint at a meaning without strictly determining it. Although she can use standard punctuation in the accustomed way, the number of unaccustomed

usages in her work prevents us from being certain about what any particular mark points to. Even with the whole poem in view, such marks can perform more than a single function. If normative syntax is our only aim, we will ignore the uncertainties that congregate around line 7, and (in our minds) replace the comma before “to be” with a semi-colon.

That is the forward-looking way of reading the line, but we have seen how Dickinson’s line endings can also invite us to pause and reflect back on what has passed, and if we reconsider the line along with the phrase preceding it—

..... to be poured
Gored through and through with Death, to be

—the possibility of “to be gored” (on the model of “to be poured”) arises. The first meaning involves inversion and a collocation (to “*gore* with death”) that, though it brings Shakespeare’s English to mind, is typical of Dickinson. Yet, considering the spondee at the head of the line, which mirrors in sound the action being described (“Góred thróugh ānd thróugh wĭth Déath”), as well as Dickinson’s habitual use of ellipsis, this construction performs the passing service of redirecting the reader’s mind to the opening word. This sense is undeniably part of any careful consideration of the syntax of the line, but it does not seem to play an ultimate part in the poem’s meaning.

That is the backward-looking way of reading the line, requiring a fairly radical inversion. Taking its words in the normal order and observing the pause at the end, the syntax of the line is double. We might pause after the comma—

Gored through and through with Death, | to be

—or midway through the line:

Gored through and through | with Death, to be

Both constructions seem equally defensible by the laws of prosody and of ordinary usage, and both are equally central to the poem's meaning. The second construction, though technically inverted, would seem to be the ordinary arrangement of words meant to bear the meaning they do, providing as it does a clue that something more vivid than "to be dead" is intended. Until we come to the beginning of the next line, we take the line to mean that the dead bird will now exist with Death.

We must pause to consider why Dickinson draws out her sense precisely when this sense is not easy to see:

The Joy that in his happy Throat
Was waiting to be poured
Gored through and through with Death, to be
Assassin of a Bird
Resembles to my outraged mind
The firing in Heaven,
On Angels - squandering for you
Their Miracles of Tune -

Although the "Assassin" is never identified, there is a clue that it belongs to the same species as the assailant of "She sights a Bird - she chuckles" (c. summer 1862, Fasc.17/F351). If not a cat, the assassin is another quadruped with pointed teeth, and though "Joy" technically governs "Gored," the subject of the verb is closely related to "his happy Throat," making "Gored through and through" suggest at once the sounds and site of the bird's pain. In other words, the meaning of the lines is recoverable by sense, not rule. Although "to be" is only required by the word "Assassin," Dickinson habitually points to the elective affinities between words, which we are often required to recognise to take her sense at all. From this view, the infinitive at the line

ending plays a pivotal role, serving at once to finish the portrait of the dead bird—which now “exists” only in death—and to turn to accuse the “Assassin,” whose life goes on.

◦ 3 ◦

However “daring” or “arbitrary” Dickinson’s lineation appeared to her contemporaries, these examples show some of the ways that it provides an index to her sense. They also cast doubt on Hollander’s belief that Dickinson’s syntactical ambiguities “could go either way (but most often not, as in Shakespeare’s sonnets, both ways at once).” Dickinson often employs the line ending to make strategic cuts to her syntax which multiply the sense of her words. The next example involves the same verb as the previous ones, but the enjambment plays on the word preceding it:

Lad of Athens, faithful be
To thyself,
And Mystery -
All the rest is Perjury - (c. 1883, F1606B)

In her early teens Dickinson answered to the name of “Socrates” among a group of girlhood friends (Sewall, *Life* 372), and here she adopts the philosopher’s persona to distil a sense of his life. Recalling the philosopher’s non-consummated relationships with a few Athenian youth, his favourite injunction (*gnothi se auton*, usually rendered “know thyself”), and the rapt attention he gave to things undreamt of by those who leave established opinions unexamined, the first three lines give a less distinct sense when they appear as one—

Lad of Athens faithful be to thyself and mystery -
All the rest is perjury -

—as Franklin transcribes them in the “draft” version of the poem (F1606A). Or rather, this lineation presents three plausible alternatives for performance. First:

Lad of Athens | faithful be to thyself | and mystery -

Second:

Lad of Athens | faithful be | to thyself and mystery -

Third:

Lad of Athens | faithful be | to thyself | and mystery -

The first of these opportunities privileges the natural speech rhythm (which syntax governs), the second metre and rhyme, the third the individual syntactic units. In the B version manuscript, the short lines punctuate the thought; each idea is made to resound by the addition of white space.

The poem’s most striking pause comes at the end of the opening line:

Lad of Athens, faithful be

The inversion of the last two words accomplishes several things. It plants a rhyme, it elevates the tone, and it places rhythmical and syntactic emphasis on the copula (not to eclipse the adjective but to ensure a vital faith). It also serves to invoke the authority of the religion current in Dickinson’s culture, evoking the sense “be faithful *to the gods*” (or “to God”). In contrast to the discourse of knowledge, that of faith better bears the sort of weight Dickinson wants here, hinting at the way Socrates practised the Delphic inscription religiously. Although the same pause occurs in the second possible setting—

Lad of Athens | faithful be | to thyself and mystery -

—the appearance of “to thyself” immediately after “faithful be” mutes the suggestion evoked by the inverted phrase when it is set at the line ending.

Each line that follows the first serves to qualify this opening thought. The archaism of “thyself” adds to the heightened tone, strengthening the sense that Dickinson is not referring to the lad’s selfish part but to his spiritual nature or God within.¹ The addition of “And Mystery” strengthens it further, redirecting the echo of Polonius (“to thine own self be true”) to suggest a deeper source of selfhood, while its independence from “To thyself” lends dignity to both objects. The last line recalls Socrates’ integrity to the end in the face of perjured witnesses, a sense of his own ending being suggested by the echo of Hamlet’s famous last words (“the rest is silence”), while its colloquial confidence (“All the rest”) sharpens the sense that his accusers are easily refuted. The poem exhibits how the pause at line ending can serve Dickinson’s already far-reaching powers of concentration.

◦ 4 ◦

Line breaks can emphasise the last words of a line, and Dickinson’s enjambments can serve to call attention to a meaning well established in usage but which might otherwise go overlooked. We start with the most sensational example:

¹ The *OED* credits Thoreau for carrying δαίμων (“one’s genius or demon”) into English: “It is the same daimon, here lurking under a human eyelid.” The poem might be read alongside the growing faith in “self-reliance” proclaimed by Emerson: “That is always best which gives me to myself. The sublime is excited in me by the great stoical doctrine, Obey thyself. That which shows God in me, fortifies me. That which shows God out of me, makes me a wart and a wen. There is no longer a necessary reason for my being” (“Divinity School Address”; *EL* 81).

Her face was in a bed of hair,
Like flowers in a plot -
Her hand was whiter than the sperm
That feeds the sacred light.

(undated, F1755)

We might wonder if the dead woman's hand was whiter than the space that divides the restrictive clause from the noun which governs it, the blank that engenders the greater sense in a fertile mind. After Dickinson's death a friend who had been part of a Shakespeare reading group with her as a young woman recounted an incident when "one of the tutors proposed to take all the copies of all the members and mark out the questionable passages." The friend went on to recall "the lofty air with which Emily took her departure, saying, 'There's nothing wicked in Shakespeare, and if there is I don't want to know it'" (qtd. in Finnerty 16). Whether or not Dickinson really "didn't want to know it" as a teenager, critics have shown that her mature poems are not innocent of carnal knowledge (Cherry; Farr), and it appears that Dickinson means more than "spermaceti" in these lines.

Spermaceti is a source of lamp oil, and while "wax" or "oil" might have easily replaced "sperm" in the third line, this word includes both of these words and also the sense of "[a]nimal seed; that by which the species is propagated" (*ADEL*, sense 1), which is not implied in the two apparent synonyms. That is the first sense Webster gives for the word, and it is the main sense the word takes in the poem. Although the syntactical relation between "sperm" and "light" suggests she means "wax" or "oil," there is nothing in the rest of the poem to suggest she is referring to an actual light. This belated Puritan who defines herself against those who "keep the Sabbath in Surplice" (F236) is not likely to invest an object with such a deal of significance. It seems rather that the celebrated whiteness of spermaceti—which Webster describes as being used to make "candles of a beautiful white color" (*ADEL*, sense 2)—is the only part of Webster's

second definition which the poem authorises. The meaning of “the sacred light” is life itself, or that which animates humans and other creatures which are the result of the assignation of sperm with an egg; accordingly, “sperm” serves as a metonymy for life itself. That Dickinson repeatedly (and explicitly) asserts the sacredness of life on earth, and seems to have been far less disturbed by corporeality than her more worldly contemporaries (she quips in F458: “To Ache is human - not polite”), suggests the meaning that sperm is rather sacred than profane, the alliteration of the two words in the line helping to secure both this sense and the pun.

Like the previous example, the next one involves a pun made prominent by the visible pause. Having recounted how “little” the “Grass ... has to do” in life, Dickinson describes a few things it does in life—

And stir all day to pretty tunes
The Breezes fetch along,
And hold the Sunshine, in it's lap
And bow to everything,

And thread the Dews, all night, like Pearl,
And make itself so fine
A Duchess, were too common
For such a noticing, ...

She then goes on to describe what the grass does after it is mown down:

And even when it die, to pass
In odors so divine -
As lowly spices, laid to sleep -
Or Spikenards perishing -

(c. 1862, Fasc.19/F379)

The word “pass” here takes the double sense of “to move” (*ADEL*, sense 1) and “die; to depart from life” (sense 5). The grass is portrayed to be active from the beginning, being said “to

brood,” “to entertain,” to “stir,” to “hold ... in it’s lap,” to “bow,” and to “thread the dew.” This prepares us to take the first sense, while the second sense is recommended by the fact that many of these actions suggest a person and clinched by the fact that the word follows hard upon “even when it *die*.”

Later in the same year, Dickinson combines these two senses in “Because I could not stop for Death” (c. late 1862, Fasc.23/F479), repeating the word three times in the anaphoric “We passed ...”, as well as in “I rose - because He sank” (c. late 1862, Fasc.21/F454), where the word is made prominent through the line ending again:

I told him Best - must pass
Through this low Arch of Flesh -
No Casque so brave
It spurn the Grave -

In both poems Dickinson uses the line ending to make vivid the abstraction, giving her dead subjects roots in earthly experience. In the poem about the grass, the preposition “in” is perfectly suited to this purpose. “Away” or “beyond” would have gone too far for belief. More closely related to the lily of the field than it is to us, grass likely feels no need to “pass” to the greater morrow, and few readers will be particularly anxious to see it do so. As the soul is said to be released from the body at death, so the “odors” from the dead grass; though these may not prove immortal, they constitute the spiritual (or at least invisible) reality of these objects. Dickinson claims only what is incredibly real: the dead grass passes “In odors *so divine*.” Once again the profane is revealed in its sacred aspect. The grass goes on to a “divine” afterlife on earth.

The sexual sense of “sperm” and the euphemistic sense of “pass” are both central to the spoken idiom, and they would not go long overlooked in these examples even if the two lines were set as one. But the line ending makes these words appear important, and so they prove to

be. In “I am alive - I guess” (c. summer 1863, Fasc.26/F605), a pun depends entirely on the visual pause between the tetrameter and trimeter lines. Describing what people usually do and say before the dead at a visitation, Dickinson notes how they

..... lean - and view it sidewise -
And add “How cold - it grew” -
And “Was it conscious - when it stepped
In Immortality”?

Dickinson often renews the idiom through lexical substitution, as she does here by replacing “passed” with the far more concrete “stepped.” The substitution would be clear even if the words were set as prose, but as Dickinson lineates them “stepped” also stirs the prosodic sense of “feet.” The pun is highly conventional, but it helps to confirm that Dickinson was “conscious” when she “stepped” in poetry.

The same meaning is made more explicit in what is probably Dickinson’s most famous use of enjambment—

I like to see it lap the Miles -
And lick the Valleys up -
And stop to feed itself at Tanks -
And then - prodigious step

Around a Pile of Mountains -

(c. autumn 1862, Fasc.19/F383)

—only the first in a series of significant run-on lines (and stanzas) in the poem.² In this example,

² The same enjambment occurs in a poem written about a year later (F515), in the same position but without the stanza break between lines 4-5, the absence of which suggests the “pain - so utter” that, as she writes, “covers the Abyss with Trance.” Next to an abyss, the widest “Pile of Mountains” is bound to seem a bit narrow, but when “pain” induces a trance, no “prodigious”

Dickinson takes a “prodigious step” over the silent beat and the white space between the stanzas; the prosodic pun in “stepped / In Immortality” is less pronounced, being perceptible only to the eye. More than simply enacting the step the soul must take as it leaves life here (line 3) for the hereafter (line 4), the enjambment performs a further function as well. Dividing the preposition from the verb, the line break echoes the colloquial phrase “step in” by concealing it, hinting that “Immortality” has not only admitted but welcomed the soul back home. It represents the height of Dickinson’s achievement with this particular pun.

◦ 5 ◦

One final example repays extended attention here. Often anthologised, the poem at once demonstrates how often Dickinson’s line endings can be pregnant with sense, and provides an image of the fact:

Publication - is the Auction
Of the Mind of Man -
Poverty - be justifying
For so foul a thing

Possibly - but We - would rather
From Our Garret go
White - unto the White Creator -
Than invest - Our Snow -

Thought belong to Him who gave it -
Then - to Him Who bear
It’s Corporeal illustration – sell
The Royal Air -

feat of footwork is needed to cross over the space. Though Dickinson wrote many poems without dividing them into stanzas, the blank space between stanzas serves to intensify the enjambment.

In the Parcel - Be the Merchant
Of the Heavenly Grace -
But reduce no Human Spirit
To Disgrace of Price -

(c. late 1863, Fasc.37/788)

Of the four instances here of sense drawn out across the silent beat (two of which involve the additional pause of the stanza break) only the second is syntactically necessary and can be certainly anticipated on first reading. Yet, even in the case of this exception, before they resonate with the words that follow, the words preceding the silent beat are first made to resound.

More than just a sign of the speaker's second thought, the syntactical joining of the first stanza with the second causes a tonal shift, softening the voice of outrage, while also preparing us for more thought to come at line's end. And so it does:

Possibly - but We - would rather
From Our Garret go

The silent beat at the end of the trimeter offers a moment to rest and suggests that the thought is complete. But while we might expect the thought to go on, the word heading the next line comes as a pure surprise:

..... go
White - unto the White Creator ...

"Poor" would not surprise us. "White" does, given the cultural association of poverty and dirt; here the sense is given that poverty produces purity. Even as its novelty fades, this association of ideas maintains its power. Preferring poverty to publishing, Dickinson maintains the purity of the life of creation. This is the kind of thought that a room of one's own and no want of life's

necessities helps to maintain, but every poet requires some amount of leisure to write at all, and Dickinson is here using images of real life to figure her thought. Based on the distinction between the material and spiritual things of this world, the thought has a long history—and extreme terms often help to clarify what matters most. Drawing out the image of publishing as “so *foul* a thing,” Dickinson turns the ordinary way of thinking on its head, using a line ending to emphasise what she is up to.

The third person plural is used three times in the second stanza, the first two occurrences seeming to refer only to the poet (a dweller of the garret but royal in spirit), while the third implies that the poet may not be struggling alone in her poverty, the image of “Our Snow” (in close proximity to the image of “the *White* Creator”) suggesting the heavenly source of her art. This has led commentators to take “Him who gave it” to refer to God and “Him Who bear” to the poet,³ but while “Our Snow” certainly suggests this the two senses Webster gives for “illustration” seem equally appropriate to describe the reader’s activity: “The act of rendering bright or glorious” and “Explanation; elucidation; a rendering clear what is obscure or abstruse.” This reading is practically reinforced by the fact that the lines themselves call for such “illustration.” It is also enacted through a striking enjambment which at first seems no enjambment at all:

Thought belong to Him who gave it -
Then - to Him Who bear

These two lines give little if any hint that a change is going to come in the next line, the sense of closure normally felt at the end of the trimeter line being heightened through the repeated

construction <“to him who” + *verb*>, which leads us to infer a simple ellipsis: “Then - to Him Who bears *it*.” Pausing here, “bear” would take the sense of “holds, carries, supports” (the bearer having first received “Thought” from the giver). There would, of course, be considerably less of this to do if Dickinson had stopped the sentence with the word.

The line ending always puts extra weight in a word, and a hard cut to the syntax can put even more:

Then - to Him Who bear
It's Corporeal illustration -

Out of the pause at the end of the line new sense issues forth to the reader involved in, rather than simply present at, the birth waiting to take place in the next. The earlier sense of “carry” is not only sustained but “illustrated” as the word develops into the sense “to bring forth or produce” (*ADEL*, sense 10), the weight of the word growing in proportion to our capacity to “bear” it. Without annulling the hint of God in “Him who gave it” or of the poet in “Him Who bear,” the new sense leads us to recognise the poet’s godlike power, and our own need to assume the poet’s labour of making with words.

The last of the poem’s drawings-out across the trimeter recalls the first:

..... sell
The Royal Air -

In the Parcel - ...

³ Gary Lee Stonum is the only critic I have found who suggests that “Him who gave it” could be the poet, and “Him Who bear” the reader, but he never develops this idea in his commentary on the poem (104-05).

Though I agree with Helen Vendler that the phrase “In the parcel” is used “to insist on the mercantile nature of the transaction” (335), this does not account for the fact that Dickinson draws the third stanza into the fourth to do so. In a poem so full of meaningful run-on lines, the fact deserves attention, especially since the dash which ends the stanza (this being as close to a full-stop the poem offers) suggests that the thought is finished. Like the opening of the second stanza, the opening of the fourth apparently hints that Dickinson has made use of this emphatic pause to calm herself a little. The word “sell” having jumped the queue (causing the poem’s only metrical irregularity), as if to suggest she has lost her composure, the prepositional phrase comes as a welcome, surprising relief. It is not only an absurd image, fit to provoke a smile. Wrapped up in this manner, the image confirms that Dickinson does not get carried away in the protest but preserves the finer spark of life without which such protests would lose any demonstrable basis. Coming after many hard cuts to the sense, the moral of the poem is stated in a manner that feels notably calm:

But reduce no Human Spirit
To Disgrace of Price -

It is like the last phrase of a song in which the voice is heard alone, all other instruments having stopped. The moral comes across distinctly and is impressive. Yet such effects are achieved not in spite of but through so many hard cuts to the sense, so many of which augment the sense—and so the life—of the surrounding words.

In the next chapters we will consider a few of the main kinds of poem Dickinson writes, and some of the variety that exists in each, as well as a couple of her main concepts as a poetic thinker. We turn first to the tradition of visionary wisdom that flourished in New England in her time.

Chapter Four

Disclosing the Natural

When we attempt to take a view of Dickinson's writings as a whole, her main concerns as a poet seem to centre around the experience on earth of what is conventionally referred to as the "Supernatural." In her seventh letter to Higginson, she remarks:

I was thinking, today - as I noticed, that the "Supernatural," was
only the Natural, disclosed -.
Not "Revelation" - 'tis - that waits,
But our unfurnished eyes - (February 1863, L280)

These two lines involve an ellipsis "our unfurnished eyes [wait]," suggesting a contrast between the perceiver who "waits" and the "Revelation" that does not. The implication of these lines is that "Revelation" is not something that waits for the right moment to occur but rather it occurs whenever our waiting eyes are furnished to perceive. Elsewhere Dickinson figures "the Natural, disclosed" as "Circumference," which represents to her both the periphery and total area of a "perfect" shape of experience. As a poet, it is her "Business" to put this shape into words as well as she can, and to do so as originally as she can.

Although this concern puts Dickinson in direct line with several German and English Romantics, it also puts her in the main line of religious thought in her surroundings. In Dickinson's revivalist culture, which continued to feel the effects of the "Second Great Awakening," at some points quite noticeably from c.1800 to the 1860s (Sewall 24, fn.5; Habegger), the habit of perceiving nature "disclosed" was encouraged by ministers and facilitated by educators. In a sermon titled "God's Thoughts" (published in a collection of

sermons in 1869), Dickinson's friend Charles Wadsworth observes that "in creation and Providence there are many things hard to be understood, and bearing, at first view, the seeming of foolishness" (9). We read the Bible, but cannot make sense of it; we view things in the world, and cannot believe they can accord with the belief in a benevolent God. The obvious inference is that "the seeming of foolishness" is apparent, not real; and that where we cannot tear off the veil that was drawn over creation at the Fall, we must trust that in Heaven—

Somehow, it will be even -
Some new Equation, given - (c. 1862, Fasc.20/F403)

Seeking to tear away the veil that covers the "Supernatural," one need not wait to be "given" the "Equation."

Dickinson "could never testify, as so many of her pious friends did, to that direct visitation of the Spirit which was essential to membership in the church" (Sewall 24)—or at least she never did so in a public setting. But as a poet she frequently attests to such visitations, as when she writes:

Conscious am I in my Chamber -
Of a shapeless friend -
He doth not attest by Posture -
Nor confirm - by Word - (c. 1863, Fasc.37/F773)

Dickinson turns the language of Congregational church membership ("attest" and "confirm") to imply a profession of poetic faith. She concludes the poem by observing that her "Instinct" tells her this "shapeless friend" is "Immortality," which Wadsworth describes as "[t]he state of the redeemed and risen spirit" (17) and which Dickinson associates with poetry, as we have seen.

For Dickinson it is this “direct visitation of the Spirit” which is essential to membership among the immortal poets.

At thirty-one, Dickinson tells Higginson of her family: “They are all religious - except me - and address an Eclipse, every morning - whom they call their ‘Father’” (25 April 1862, L261). God, whose full glory is represented by the sun, is obscured in this picture, evidently by some interposed moon. The picture represents what the poet’s Puritan ancestors had fought so hard so many years to avoid: failing to attend to God in his glory, falling into mere forms of worship or gestures established in the past. The poet’s family only sees God in rough outline, his full glory obscured. “Religious” here is Dickinson’s word for a person who observes the forms of religion. Dickinson’s own concern to perceive the “Supernatural” on Earth demonstrates a contrary tendency, one which is more in keeping with New England forms of worship.

Dickinson would have known the scientific explanation of eclipses from her school training; but while she does not appear to have encountered any poets among her teachers, there seems to have been a heavy emphasis placed upon beholding the world in its revealed aspect, with nothing in between, which is her general conception of “poetry” (c.1875, F1353; c. 1879, F1491). In August 1833, just three years before she would admit the first classes to Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, Mary Lyon was busy travelling through upstate New York, recording the highlights of her travels in letters to her friend Zilpah Grant. Travelling through the Catskill Mountains, Lyon writes on August 8, 1833: “I remember that, for my own sake, you are more desirous I should dwell on what I see and hear than on the seminary at home, in which my heart is so much interested, but about which I have not indulged one moment’s anxiety since I left you” (57). A tourist whose chief aim is “to see ... the mighty wonders of nature,” Lyon is only secondarily concerned with the writing of her letters, which she refers to at one point as “these

fragments of time, so few and so short” (57-8). What is striking about the letter is not the style but what it says about the size of Lyon’s resolution to experience the world at first-hand. She aims to clear her mind of everything she has heard already from others:

I have many things on hand, with which I should be glad to fill this sheet. Perhaps you may expect that I should tell you something of the great Niagara, or, rather, that I should tell you how this exhibition of the power of God affected my mind. I cannot tell you any thing about it. I have heard so many things said by one and another who visited the Falls; one saying, “You will be disappointed”; another, “You will not be disappointed, if you stay long enough;” a third, “I do not think it exceeds this object, or that;” and a fourth, “You never will wish to see any thing more; every grand object will lose its charms after your visit to Niagara.” I have heard many compare it to fleeces of cotton, to banks of falling snow, to the dashing of ocean waves, to the roaring of thunder, &c. I feared that I should be unable to feel the soul-moving power, and I had an ardent desire that I might not acknowledge, even to myself, any second-hand emotions, any influence which did not affect my own heart. (60)

Lyon could be caricatured as the meeting of the minds of Johns Locke and Calvin; a perfectly rational nonconformist stirred with “an ardent desire” to experience things without in an orderly fashion.

A few weeks after she visits Niagara Falls, Lyon writes to Grant on August 31, 1833: “I cannot tell you any thing about it,” but she then proceeds to draw several meanings out of the place:

I spent a day and a half, and my time was most fully occupied. I would give you a description of my ramble, but I could not tell you what I saw, what I heard. O, the voice of many waters! I had formed no conception of the scene, or, rather, of the many scenes. Perhaps it is because my powers of conception are so feeble. It does, indeed, mock all attempts at description; it is a stain on human pride and greatness; it laughs to scorn all the trickeries of art. (60)

The style of this passage resembles that of *A Missionary Offering* (1843), Lyon's hundred-page pamphlet on foreign missions. It shows Lyon getting at her experience in words but not quite getting words for others to share that experience. She points to what she sees and hears—"this exhibition of the power of God"—but Niagara stands in Lyon's mind as an emblem of human impotence. She is able to experience what is grand in it, but she cannot comprehend it. She laughs to scorn "all the trickeries of art" and attributes this to "the voice of many waters"—evidently unable to believe that such "trickeries" might also serve the same end she seeks.

But Lyon was a teacher, not a poet, and if it was easy for her to mock the art of writing it must have been very hard for her to "dwell" too long on these wonders of the world without also thinking of her beloved "seminary at home." One passage strongly suggests Lyon had not lost sight of her motives as a teacher:

Very much depends, I believe, on the order in which the various parts are viewed. The smaller should be viewed first, and then the greater; and in going from step to step, the soul continually expands to take in the larger views, until we reach the climax. The last step should be to cross over to the Canada side, and there take a view of the whole. (60)

The passage gives the impression of an educator with a strong sense of order, and it accords with what is known of Lyon's views of discipline (Lyon; Cole; Green). Having realised her hope of seeing something wonderful in the Falls, Lyon is here concerned to describe how this hope might be realised again by another. She then immediately adds: "This is merely my opinion. I have heard no statement about it; but I am almost confident that it is so." Lyon had "spent a day and a half" at the Falls, during which time she "was most fully occupied," a fact which supports her authoritative tone.

Lyon never sought literary distinction, which helps to explain why she never achieved it; she was both highly animated and intelligent. Yet it seems probable that her attitude towards the world contributed to Dickinson's poetic development. Though it might be ridiculous to imagine, what we know of life at Mount Holyoke in its early years makes it not just plausible but likely that Dickinson was made to endure similar exercises for perceiving the world in its revealed aspect, when she attended it for the school-year of 1847-48 (Green). Considering what we have seen of Dickinson's investment in the notion of organic form, we might guess that she found the pace of life under Lyon a bit too demanding; the daily routine was very tightly scheduled and it certainly never afforded the opportunity for being "most fully occupied" in a single pursuit for "a day and a half," let alone for a longer period of time.

Whether it is true or not about the poet as a person, Dickinson's claim to Higginson that she "never knew how to tell time by the clock till I was 15" (16 August 1862, L342b) hints at a truth about her poetry, which regularly proceeds without regard to the customary measures of experience. But while it is hard to imagine Dickinson deriving much direct benefit from performing prescribed motions at school, her poems show her no less desirous than Lyon and Grant to dwell on what she "saw" and what she "heard." Yet, as a poet, Dickinson's principal aim was to write not only what she "saw" and what she "heard" but what remains to "see" and "hear" through words. She must have known intuitively that her only hope as a poet required a firm belief in the power of description and metaphor making to disclose the significance of the world.

Lyon's letter is also instructive in a more specific way. Having heard contradictory opinions about the Falls beforehand, she is afraid she will be paralysed before it, "unable to feel the soul-moving power" first-hand. Lyon views the natural world as a book, and intends to read

it as a Protestant—evidently believing that she would prove equal to what matters in it. Though Dickinson’s poems never take such a plain style and practically deny Lyon’s view of “the trickeries of art,” the words of the Mount Holyoke preceptor serve well to express the poet’s own thinking: she seeks to be original, evidently in the belief that doing so is not only possible but is also the best of all possible choices to make.

◦ 2 ◦

In the New England literary culture of Dickinson’s times, belief in originality, and in its supreme value, was rampant. Emerson gives the belief its classic shape in the opening paragraph of *Nature* (1836), where he expresses it in two questions:

Our age is retrospective. It builds the sepulchres of the fathers. It writes biographies, histories, and criticism. The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs? (5)

These questions roused a generation to create what is now known as “the American Renaissance,” a phrase which suggests in its noun a literary parallel to the religious “awakening” that stirred through New England Congregationalist communities in the same years and after (and which reminds us now that non-traditionalism itself became traditional in the literary culture of the United States). When Dickinson came of age almost a quarter of a century later, young New Englanders had answered these questions mostly in favour of “insight” and “revelation.” This fact explains why Dickinson never articulates the visionary position explicitly,

as well as how she was able to imagine such a rewarding alternative to the missionary one then encouraged for women by ministers and teachers like Lyon.

But young people grow up, and only some can go on sustaining a life of “insight” and “revelation,” and only some of these will do so in words, which is what makes Dickinson such a rarity. Dickinson’s capacity for insight, and Higginson’s apparent incapacity for it, helps to explain why he thinks her work “Dark,” and why she thinks him impaired “visually”—

You say I confess the little mistake, and omit the large - Because I
can see Orthography - but the Ignorance out of sight - is my
Preceptor’s charge -

—where the final words of both clauses (“large” and “charge”) hint that what is “out of sight” might still be within hearing.

You say “Beyond your knowledge.” You would not jest with me,
because I believe you - but Preceptor - you cannot mean it? All
men say “What” to me, but I thought it a fashion.

There is no reason to think she is being less than ingenuous here. She cannot believe her writing is “beyond” so many intelligent people. We have seen already how Higginson invokes Coleridge’s opinion that obscurity can be “a compliment to the reader.” But rather than “a compliment to the reader,” Dickinson’s “obscurity” seems to be chiefly motivated to provoke this special kind of perception.

One of the poems Dickinson refers to in the opening question of her fifth letter to Higginson (“Are these more orderly?”), serves to declare herself as a poet of revealed perception:

Before I got my eye put out -
I liked as well to see
As other creatures, that have eyes -
And know no other way -

But were it told to me, Today,
That I might have the Sky
For mine, I tell you that my Heart
Would split, for size of me -

The Meadows - mine -
The Mountains - mine -
All Forests - Stintless stars -
As much of noon, as I could take -
Between my finite eyes -

The Motions of the Dipping Birds -
The Morning's Amber Road -
For mine - to look at when I liked,
The news would strike me dead -

So safer - guess - with just my soul
Upon the window pane
Where other creatures put their eyes -
Incautious - of the Sun -

(c. 1862, F336)

Perceiving with her “eye” is here contrasted with perceiving with “just” her “soul.” The repeated pairing of words which we would normally expect to rhyme (see/way, sky/me, stars/eyes, Road/dead, pane/Sun) hints at how her special mode of perception extends as well to her ear. Unlike some writers of revealed perception, Dickinson makes the best case for sensual perception. Far from denigrating the appearance of the phenomenal world, the poet claims that her “Heart / Would split” with joy if she could regain her capacity to perceive it. The bulk of the poem, in fact, shows Dickinson lamenting her loss of sight, celebrating the natural world as it

appears to the “unfurnished” eye and identifying closely with those who “know no other way.” But Dickinson turns on this fact to argue that it is “safer” for her to go on perceiving in the extended sense of cutting through appearances.

The significance of sound is especially marked in the last two lines of the second and fourth stanzas:

For mine, I tell you that my Heart
Would split, for size of me -
.....
For mine - to look at when I liked,
The news would strike me dead -

“For mine” implies not only “for myself” but also “in exchange for my current capacity for special perception.” The splitting of the thought “my Heart / Would split” shows how extra sound pairings occur in Dickinson’s ecosystem of off-rhyme. The alliteration of “split, for size of me” (where “sighs of me”—coming shortly after “Heart”—is also heard) is further reflected in “look at when I liked,” where “liked” echoes in “strike” and also provides an addition to the end-pairing of “Road” and “dead” in the last stanza.

The line ending after “see” in the second line draws out the sense of the opening line—

Before I got my eye put out -
I liked as well to see

—while the thought that follows it—

I liked as well to see
As other creatures, that have eyes -
And know no other way -

—insists that she has been forced to find an “other way” to “see” than the ordinary one.

Perceiving things according to the “soul,” Dickinson no longer thinks of “Noon” as a natural phenomenon; it rather comes to stand for a state of fullness and illumination, and is closely related to the image of the wood in her symbolism. Whether or not Higginson’s comments on her style inspired it, the poem is well-equipped to appeal to those torn between “the world” and “Revelation,” who “know” how to “see” with the “soul” but also “guess” that it is “safer” to do so since the world overwhelms the speaker with its innumerable wonders.

◦ 3 ◦

Though it deserves to be a commonplace of scholarship devoted to her works, Dickinson’s place among the tradition of poet-seers is overlooked by many commentators. The next poem is perfectly comprehensible in light of this tradition:

“Lethe” in my flower,
Of which they who drink,
In the fadeless Orchards
Hear the bobolink!

Merely flake or petal
As the Eye beholds
Jupiter! my father!
I perceive the rose!

(c. 1859, F2/F54)

Yet this poem has recently provoked Virginia Jackson to argue in *Dickinson’s Misery* that the “lines do not finally point toward ‘Dickinson’ but toward something lost and now unnamed and unnameable—toward a less metaphorical context now faded from view” (199). Jackson develops this reading in a later article included in the Blackwell *Companion to Emily Dickinson* (2008).

Interrupting a series of penetrating comments about the poem's relation to Keats's *Nightingale* Ode and the sixth book of Virgil's *Aeneid*, Jackson conjectures that

there was another manuscript of the lines that begin "'Lethe' in my flower," this one not copied into a fascicle but sent in correspondence, probably also to Susan, and that to those lost lines sent to a lost recipient, a flower was attached. (207-8)

Jackson presses out this conjecture in the next twelve pages of her article, to conclude that the "lines" remain incomprehensible without such a natural prop. With this flower in mind, Jackson finds a sense of humour in the "lines" but not a poem. Dickinson's "joke," she concludes, "is lost on us, because, like so much of Dickinson's thinking, it was too intimate for print" (218).

Without denying the potential value of such conjectures as to what a text may lack in the way of context, the one applied here seems motivated by Jackson's resistance to what she calls "lyric reading" rather than by any absence in the text itself. Noting "the lack of any modern critical commentary on the lines themselves," Jackson invents a long paragraph of such commentary (212). At the beginning of the next paragraph she turns to the topic of "the pleasure of reading poetry," but immediately—and, in light of her commentary, understandably—feels the need to add: "I do not mean to parody those pleasures" (213). But it seems she never makes an attempt to enjoy these pleasures either, and it is hard to see how a poet's misery can ever be relieved by a reader's belief that her poem lacks something essential, or depend on things "too intimate for print."

Whether or not symbolic interpretation yields the best reading of it, the poem is ripe for such consideration. Between "Lethe," "the fadeless Orchards," and "Jupiter"—each of which are poetic conventions dating back to antiquity—"the bobolink" stands out as the only native-grown New Englander. In "The Life of Birds," Higginson refers to "the hoarse cooing of the bobolink"

(372), reminding us that Dickinson is concerned to “Hear” sounds beyond those ordinarily considered beautiful and melodious. “My flower” is another highly conventional reference, this time for the poet’s representative poem, while “they” refers to her possible readers. Her “flower” is whole in the sense that it stands alone—cut off from its roots in time and in the life of its maker. But a sense of wholeness also comes through in the distinction Dickinson draws between “flake or petal” and “the rose,” as well as between the verbs “behold” and “perceive,” these naming what might be called sensual and poetic perception respectively. Emerson makes this distinction in the opening paragraph of “The Poet,” complaining that “there is no accurate adjustment between the spirit and the organ, much less is the latter the germination of the former” in the philosophy then current (*EL* 447). It is also supported by Webster’s definitions of the two words.¹

Jackson’s conjecture about a rose actually included in the “poetry” of “‘Lethe’ in my flower” would at best make the poem into a joke at the expense of the object; more likely it would lead to confusion. The first stanza, after all, is explicitly concerned with something beyond mere sensual experience; surely the phrase “fadeless orchards” refers to the realm of myth, not fact; it is a typical image for what lyric poets seek and lament when lost. If the second stanza reflects back upon the first stanza, then “flake or petal” and “the rose” cannot refer to phenomena if the eight-line poem is to be something a reader might actually “perceive” in

¹ Webster’s first definition of “perceive” (“To have knowledge or receive impressions of external objects through the medium or instrumentality of the senses or bodily organs”) captures the only senses he gives for “behold.” It is the two other senses of “perceive” which inform Dickinson’s use of the word: “To know; to understand; to observe” (sense 2), a sense usefully illustrated by a quotation from Locke: “Till we ourselves see it with our own eyes, and *perceive* it by our own understanding, we are in the dark”—a quotation that can shine much light into Dickinson’s use of related imagery. Also, sense 3: “To be affected by; to receive impressions from,” which implies a distinction between merely sensual apprehension and emotional (or what I’m calling spiritual) engagement with the object perceived.

Dickinson's sense—that is, if what Jackson calls “the lines” is to become a poem. The result of Jackson's kind of attention is that she merely “beholds” the parts of the text (both those which are actually there and those she has invented a plausible myth to grasp), and fails to “perceive” what gives it life. In pursuit of a “lost object,” Jackson overlooks what remains to be found in Dickinson's words. Concealed only by its own conspicuousness, the meaning of the text suffers from the assumption that Dickinson's poetry is made only for misery—that her writings do not provide adequate notation for her thought. What is lost from such readings turns out to be the language of poetry, or that which contains within itself the spirit of the “Lethe” which creates within those who drink it “the fadeless Orchards.” Far from being a bunch of lines that foil “lyric reading,” Dickinson's poem compels it, implying her commitment to perceiving “the Natural, disclosed.”

While the image of the bobolink belongs to Dickinson's claim, “I see - New Englandly” (c. 1861, Fasc.11/F256), “the fadeless Orchards” recalls a sentence from her fifth letter to Higginson: “there's a noiseless noise in the Orchard - that I let persons hear” (L271). That Dickinson finds an analogy for the existence of heaven in sound is revealing:

This World is not conclusion.
A Species stands beyond -
Invisible, as Music -
But positive, as Sound -

(c. summer 1862, Fasc.18/F373)

It reminds us that the power of the poet-seer extends as well to the audible world. A little later in the same fascicle, a poem opens:

Better - than Music!
For I - who heard it -
I was used - to the Birds - before -

This - was different - 'Twas Translation -
Of all tunes I knew - and more - (c. autumn 1862, F378)

Setting the phrase “I was used - to” in opposition to “This - was different,” the poem implies what we have noted already: a poet seeking to represent the shape of enchanted experience would do well to develop an original style, or a mode of expression which readers are unlikely ever to grow “used - to.” The style must enable “Translation - / Of all tunes.”

◦ 4 ◦

Dickinson often signals her “other way” of seeing with light imagery, as when she blends birdsong with darkness to set the scene:

The Birds begun at Four o'clock -
Their period for Dawn -
A Music numerous as space -
But neighboring as Noon -

I could not count their Force -
Their numbers did expend
As Brook by Brook bestows itself
To multiply the Pond.

The Listener - was not -
Except Occasional Man -
In homely industry arrayed -
To overtake the Morn -

Nor was it for applause -
That I could ascertain -
But independent Extasy
Of Universe, and Men -

By Six, the Flood had done -
No tumult there had been
Of Dressing, or Departure -
Yet all the Band - was gone -

The Sun engrossed the East -
The Day Resumed the World -
The Miracle that introduced
Forgotten, as fulfilled.

(c. 1863, Fasc.39/F504B)

The poem tells a tale of two time frames: one begins with the rising of “The Sun,” the other begins with the rising of the birds. This contrast is sharpened by the fact that “all the Band” of birds leaves before the “period for Dawn” comes for the human world. The ambiguous tense of the opening words “The Birds begun,” where it is not clear if she means “had begun” or if she means rather “began,” hints at a state of experience beyond the temporal one. But the poem quickly settles into the past tense, reporting the extraordinary experience rather than attempting to reproduce it.

The poem takes place before the light of day, when most people are still asleep and only the speaker appears to behold the world in its glory. The appearance of the “Occasional Man” in the third stanza underlines the fact that only those with “ears to hear” (like the speaker) are able to perceive “The Miracle,” while the absence of an article before the adjective-noun—along with the unusual capitalisation of the first word—points at an etymological pun on “Occasional” to suggest the sense of “fallen” (Webster lists the roots “*L. occasio*, from *occido*, to fall”). The man is associated with “industry” as well as wilfulness—he aims “To overtake the Morn”—which makes him stand opposite to the speaker, who is happy to simply perceive “The Miracle” as it “introduces” the day. The pairing of “*Occasional Man*” with “overtake the *Morn*” is indicated by

line endings, while the yoking of “the Morn” with “The Miracle” is more subtle but no less secure. The word “Morn” is rightly capitalised in this context; there is nothing less important in it than there is in “Miracle,” but the phrase “overtake the morn” seems far more natural in the spoken idiom than “overtake the miracle,” which sounds comparatively odd. The “Occasional Man” represents what New England Puritans call the “unregenerate soul”; the speaker, what they call the state of grace. Perry Miller describes the latter state in his study of *New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (1939):

There are moments of vision when the living spirit seems to circulate in his veins, when man is in accord with the totality of things, when his life ceases to be a burden to him and separateness is ecstatically overcome by mysterious participation in the whole. (7)

This nicely captures the experience Dickinson describes; it is precisely what the “Occasional Man”—being too caught up in work—cannot enjoy. Dickinson’s inclusion of him in her portrait serves to underline the fact that the ecstatic overcoming of her own “separateness” involves its own exclusions.

The point of the contrast is not to censure those too occupied with concerns of the world to behold its wonders; and while the contrast seems to imply that those, like the speaker, who do behold these wonders might be counted among the “redeemed,” the poem does nothing to praise the privileged. The contrast is rather set up to imply the attitude that supports “our unfurnished eyes.” The word “overtake” occurs in the better-known poem of vision, “A Light exists in Spring,” where it is associated with “Science” and opposed to what “Human Nature feels” (c. 1865, Set 7/F962). We recall Dickinson’s reflection: “I suppose the pride that stops the Breath, in the Core of Woods, is not of Ourselves,” and the suggestion that something beyond the common “pride”—and even beyond herself—underlies the poet’s extraordinary perception of things. It is

a striking statement of a profoundly moving experience from a poet who is not normally inclined to champion humility.

By the late 1850s, when Dickinson was coming of age as a poet, New England readers were generally resistant to poetic obscurity and other excessive forms of expression, the high reputation enjoyed by Robert Browning being an exception to the rule. The poet's friend Josiah Holland, an established writer and editor, is reported to have told a mutual friend sometime after 1870: "I have some poems of hers under consideration for publication—but they really are not suitable—they are too ethereal" (qtd. in Sewall, *Life* 377). But while the description might seem to fit many of her poems, Dickinson does not simply float above the clouds, detached from the earth. We have seen already a couple examples of how she grounds her thought through incongruities of diction, like pairing the images of "Jupiter" and the "bobolink," and making the pregnant comment—

Nor was it for applause -
That I could ascertain -

—where she is not simply stating the ridiculous but seems to allude to the human singers who are ruled by more complex motives than "independent Extasy." The word "ascertain" suggests a very different attitude than simple innocence, pointing to a fact of many of Dickinson's poems of revealed perception: they are not achieved by simply shutting off her mind; they represent not some dreamy leave-taking from the world but engagement with it.

Holland was well-attuned to the notion of "applause," being co-editor (with Samuel Bowles) of the *Springfield Republican* in the 1850s and 1860s and the founder of *Scribner's Magazine* in 1870. But Holland does not seem to have been very appreciative of Dickinson's poems, and is likely one of the "men" she refers to when she tells Higginson, "All men say

‘What’ to me, but I thought it a fashion.” It seems this is why she sent him, around 1865, the far more “etherealised” poem about a similar early-morning experience listening to birds:

At Half past Three, a single bird
Unto a silent Sky
Propounded but a single term
Of cautious melody.

At Half past Four, experiment
Had subjugated test
And lo, her silver Principle
Supplanted all the rest -

At Half past Seven, element
Nor implement - be seen
And Place, was where the Presence was
Circumference between -

(F1099A)

In an influential essay on “Purification and Danger,” Geoffrey Hartman comments on the poem in contrast to “The Birds begun at Four o’clock”:

How dry and bookish, as if a computer had given a number of words, and instructed to produce a minimal narrative! Only that narrative remains from the earlier version, though more stark, more outlined; the pathos and the moral play are gone. The sun too is gone, and the personal focus of reference. In this emptied landscape abstractions nest a “single Bird,” the remnant of a purification whose motive we are trying to find. (127)

Hartman thinks “At Half past Three, a single bird” is “less readable” than “The Birds begun at Four o’clock” (126), involving as it does a “shift toward abstraction and a nonrepresentational method” (128). It represents for Hartman “a coming into ... indeterminacy,” and proves

Dickinson's membership among a small host of poets who "place so great a burden on the shoulders of poetry, that language breaks with itself" (131).

To me, the burdens of the poem grow a lot lighter when it is read as an expression in the revelatory mode. From this view, the poem is seen to describe an experience that begins to occur in the middle of the night and is brought to an end by the light of common day. Hartman resists such certainty: "we don't even know, for sure, whether morning or evening, sunrise or sunset, is the period, because all mention of light is omitted" (127). But while it would be hard to say "for sure" when the poem takes place, Hartman's "coming into ... indeterminacy" theory is considerably weakened once we suppose that it is a poem of early morning. "A *single* bird" sings to a "*silent* sky" in the late afternoon? Where is the rest of the world and its noisemakers from 3:30 to 4:30, when "the rest"—a pleasant pun at the expense of the other birds, who in contrast seem a bit sleepy—appears to be "supplanted" by this single bird with "her silver Principle"? Where are the trains, the hammers, and the carriages? Where the other animals, the school children, the steady stream of "Occasional" men?

Once we suppose this, we are well-placed to note a submerged synaesthesia in "her silver Principle," which refers to the "cause, source, or origin" of the bird's song (cf. *ADEL* "principle," sense 1) rather than to some visible aspect of her. Once this is noticed, it is easier to see that "her silver Principle" is a metonym for the song itself. Synaesthesia is a common feature of the revelatory genre, appearing also in "The Birds begun at Four o'clock," quite explicitly, when the "Music" is described as being "numerous as space." Such confusions are bound to occur when we attempt to apply diurnal standards of order to "disclosed" experiences.

The assumption also clarifies the distinction between "Place" and "Presence," which eludes Hartman's deconstructionism: "'And Place was where the Presence was' is two-faced,

since it could be an expression for sheer vacancy or sheer plenitude. Place is the absence of a Presence that has been; *or* Place coincides with Presence” (129). But if we step back from the poem or “close our eyes” to what these words might ordinarily mean when set in opposition to each other as they are, Dickinson’s point is clear enough: the “scene” is no longer enchanted, the “vision” has been blurred. The three final concepts are knit together by like endings, “Place” representing the world engrossed by the brightness of the sun, “Presence” the state of being which the birdsong appears to provoke, while “Circumference” signifies the boundary of her consciousness, which is caught in the unhappy position between enchanted memory and the bare phenomenal world. The “Element” and “Implement” of the “Experiment”—another three words joined by like endings—are no longer “seen”: the light of day has reduced the birds to silence. The antithesis between “Place” and “Presence” is implied in many poems of the same genre, where the word “presence” is used with the same meaning.²

Hartman calls the poem’s style “elliptical” (130). It is, though not chiefly in its syntax but in its sense. The meanings of its words are omitted, and may be supplied by the reader. By ordinary standards, its omissions are drastic: it lays a great burden on our shoulders. But while Hartman thinks the poem sounds like it is computer-generated, I would rather compare the style to a very intelligent operating system which has a built-in security feature that makes it crash in the wrong hands. Surely this is the quality that makes so many of Dickinson’s poems effect something like a sublime reading experience. She is constantly putting us in a position to read

² The *OED* defines *presence* as “[a] person or thing that exists or is present in a place but is not seen, esp. a divine, spiritual, or incorporeal being or influence felt or perceived to be present” (sense 6), and quotes *Tintern Abbey*: “And I have felt / A presence that disturbs me with the joy / Of elevated thoughts.”

thoughtfully, or fail miserably. The poem thus reproduces the conditions of the experience it relates. The style guides us to “see.”

But while such methods are typical of Dickinson’s poems, it remains to say what makes “At Half past Three” a particular triumph. Recalling the incongruous combination of classical and topical allusions in her “Lethe” poem, this poem shows Dickinson appropriating the language of science (“experiment,” “test,” “Principle,” “element,” “implement”) to describe her revealed perception of the bird’s song; the incongruity helps to make these words come alive. Surrounded by these words, “cautious” takes on a special sense, suggesting that the bird not only shares traits of consciousness with its featherless listener but also shows the kind of carefulness we expect of a person conducting an experiment. In addition to these words, the entire poem is structured by the thrice-repeated phrase “At Half past,” a phrase which Hartman describes as demonstrating “mock precision” (129). But Hartman never says what the phrase is supposed to mock, and he does not explain the significance of the phrase any further.

A clue to the poem comes in the little word “lo,” which appears at the exact midpoint of the poem. Considering that Hartman gives more than four pages of commentary to this short poem, it is strange that this is the only prominent word which he fails to notice. The word is too unusual in this context to overlook its double function, pointing to the normally opposed views of discloser and ironist at once. The word appears just when the vision is at its height, and is striking next to other words in the stanza and in the two surrounding ones. In this atmosphere the rarefied word lacks all its usual weight; in itself the word suggests the “ethereal” style, but surrounded by the glaring words of positive science it at once implies a send-up to those with their heads stuck in the clouds and provides assurance that she is not one of them. Instead of the usual solemnity, the word suggests a smirk; rather than deflating the revelatory mode, the poem

shows how language normally used for matters-of-fact can be turned to serve “furnished eyes.” The poem’s “dry and bookish” manner is essential to its irony.

This is a poem of revelatory perception presented in the terms of science, a vision recollected in the cool light of the lab. The poem offers an ironic reworking of the revelatory poem and its conventions, not to deny the importance of revealed experience but to expose the ways by which it is generated through language. To those who think Dickinson’s head was in the clouds, the poem offers a good indication that she was fully conscious of the fact. It shows her once again determined to be original: confirming that though she will not take the paths recommended by the professional writers she knew, she usually remains within hearing.

◦ 5 ◦

Transmuting Holland’s observation into a term, we might use the word *etherealisation* to refer to the technique by which Dickinson attempts to recover what is too often sacrificed through empiricism. The nature she cares to represent usually lies off the well-trod paths of ordinary language, and this she knows must be conveyed in the representation. To proclaim “it is strange”—or to state anything so directly—would render it common. Richard Wilbur includes the next example among Dickinson’s “small masterpieces of exact description” (35). It is among her most enchanting poems of revealed perception, and proves well that vision does not come to her only when she closes her eyes.

A Route of Evanescence,
With a revolving Wheel -
A Resonance of Emerald
A Rush of Cochineal -
And every Blossom on the Bush

Adjusts it's tumbled Head -
The Mail from Tunis - probably,
An easy Morning's Ride - (c. 1883, F1489)

This is not Dickinson's first attempt to describe a hummingbird, and her previous attempt suggests the importance of revision for representing nature in its disclosed aspect:

Within my Garden, rides a Bird
Upon a single Wheel -
Whose spokes a dizzy music make
As 'twere a travelling Mill -

He never stops, but slackens
Above the Ripest Rose -
Partakes without alighting
And praises as he goes,

Till every spice is tasted -
And then his Fairy Gig
Reels in remoter atmospheres -
And I rejoin my Dog,

And He and I, perplex us
If positive, 'twere we -
Or bore the Garden in the Brain
This Curiosity -

But He, the best Logician,
Refers my clumsy eye -
To just vibrating Blossoms!
An exquisite Reply!

(c. autumn 1862, Fasc.18/F370)

The two poems are noticeably distinguished by varying degrees of concentration, but the later poem wisely changes the intrusive voice of the speaker for an objective one. This cancels the

metaphysical speculations (“If positive ... / Or bore the Garden in the Brain / This Curiosity”) which detract attention from the object, which is the exclusive focus of the later poem.

The word “ride” occurs in both poems: serving as a verb in the first version and a noun in the second, the word is striking in both instances. It is an original way of describing the motion of a hummingbird. In the earlier poem, the image is extended in “spokes” to happily convey the sound of the moving bird—whose “Wheel” (coming into contact only with air) would otherwise make no sound at all. The reappearance of the word “Ride” in the later version, as a noun, shows considerable improvement; while the verb plays a subordinate role to the image of the “single Wheel” in the earlier poem, the noun contributes to the power of the later portrait. While the collocation of “adjust” with “head” is idiomatic in certain circumstances, applying the verb to describe the head of a flower is unusual. This is comparable to saying a table is “tap dancing” when, in the process of being moved, its feet are made to clatter against a hard floor. This is a border case between the creation of metaphor and the recreation of the idiom. A similar case occurs in “tumbled Head,” where the adjective seems to substitute for “fallen” (a common collocation) while also implying (and here is the discovery) that the hummingbird has knocked it over, that the blissful union of bird and bush is done. These departures from conventional language constitute a crucial part of the later poem’s success as a poem of enchanted perception.

◦ 6 ◦

We have seen already how the extraordinary language of Dickinson’s poems of vision reflects and also constitutes her extraordinary perception of things. These poems represent extraordinary states of being—the rare and often very brief experiences we can enjoy. This fact implies a

contrary “down in the dumps” genre in which the poet depicts the “Occasional” (or fallen) state of being. A discussion of one specimen of this genre will serve as a counter for my final example:

From Blank to Blank
A Threadless Way
I pushed Mechanic feet -
To stop - or perish - or advance -
Alike indifferent -

If end I gained
It ends beyond
Indefinite disclosed -
I shut my eyes - and groped as well
'Twas lighter - to be Blind -

(c. late 1862, Fasc.23/F484)

Harold Bloom provides the best-known commentary on this poem at the centre of his *Western Canon* (1994), noting an allusion to the thread of Ariadne, who is not present to assist Dickinson through her labyrinth, and dropping this clue:

The ruin or blank that we see in nature, Emerson had written, is in our own eye. His allusion was presumably to Coleridge’s “Dejection” ode, where the protagonist gazes “with how blank an eye,” a further allusion, as both Coleridge and Emerson knew, to Milton’s lament for his blindness. “To be Blind” by choice is to give up seeing the Blank, which, in Dickinson as in her male precursors, is a figure for poetic crisis. (293)

Although I do not find Bloom fills out the rest of Dickinson’s blank, this takes us a good way into the poem; the poem articulates, in riddled form, the severest crisis that a poet of vision can face.

It is also the severest crisis a person can face for Dickinson, who asked Higginson when he first visited her in Amherst: “How do most people live without any thoughts. There are many people in the world (you must have noticed them in the street) How do they live. How do they get strength to put on their clothes in the morning” (dated “Tuesday 10 P.M.”, 16 August 1870, L342a). Being without “thread” in the first part of the poem, Dickinson tells us that she “pushed Mechanic feet,” which is an image of utter paralysis for a poet committed to organic form. In the more famous poem “After great pain, a formal feeling comes” (c. autumn 1862, Fasc.18/F372), this state of being is associated with a form of pain so sharp it shuts down sense:

The Feet, mechanical, go round -
A Wooden way
Of Ground, or Air, or Ought -
Regardless grown,
A Quartz contentment, like a stone -

—making it clear that “From Blank to Blank” does not articulate a complaint suffered only by poets. To be “Alike indifferent” whether one should “stop - or perish - or advance” has critical repercussions for any creature.

The Emerson passage to which Bloom alludes comes in the final chapter of *Nature*, and provides a further clue to explaining this difficult poem:

The problem of restoring to the world original and eternal beauty, is solved by the redemption of the soul. The ruin or the blank, that we see when we look at nature, is in our own eye. (91)

Emerson’s chapter is titled “Prospects,” an appropriate one for the conclusion to a book that opens with the declaration, “Our age is retrospective” (5)—which, as we will see in the next chapter, proved a declaration of war on the dominant science of his day, and paved the way for

Dickinson's. Emerson's first book shows New England Transcendentalism in its infancy, and it is sometimes criticised for being extremely naive about the powers of the discloser for "restoring to the world original and eternal beauty." Retrospect is often said to improve a person's vision, and the fact that more than a quarter of a century had passed between the release of *Nature* and the writing of Dickinson's poem put her at an obvious advantage over her older contemporary.

While the second part of the poem does not end happily, it does end with a considerable glimmer of hope, as well as a moral that distinguishes the poem from the many others Dickinson wrote to represent the same mode of being with "unfurnished eyes." The fact that she is able to suppose that she may have "gained" an "end" (i.e. a result) from the ordeal suggests that the experience has not left her without prospect. Yet, at the time of writing the only thing that has been "disclosed" to her is what she calls "Indefinite," which continues the punning on "end" (where the word's literal meaning is "without end"), suggesting the sense: "That has no certain limits, or to which the human mind can affix none" (*ADEL*, sense 2). Unlike many of the other poems Dickinson wrote in this mode, including "After great pain, a formal feeling comes," the poem concludes with a real sense of what that "end" may be:

I shut my eyes - and groped as well
'Twas lighter - to be Blind -

Here "lighter" takes the double sense of "less weighty or burdensome" and also "involving more light or illumination." This does not show quite the same degree of optimism as the closing of Tennyson's "Ulysses," but it suggests that the poet has not only learned from the experience but also that the lesson (it is "lighter - to be Blind") might benefit her the next time she experiences the problem. It affirms the disclosed perspective she expresses in "We grow accustomed to the Dark" in the form of a fable. The pun on "lighter" itself lightens the tone of this previously

perplexing utterance; in fact, if we trace the pattern of puns from “end ... ends ... Indefinite” to overlap with the single word pun on “lighter,” we might even take the moral of the poem to involve a directive to wordplay. “The ruin or the blank, that we see when we look at nature, is in our own eye”: the poem shows Dickinson learning this lesson the hard way.

◦ 7 ◦

My final example resembles the previous one in that the poet’s natural object is left undisclosed by the end. Yet the poem implies a markedly lighter attitude towards the fact:

Four Trees - opon a solitary Acre -
Without Design
Or Order, or Apparent Action -
Maintain -

The Sun - opon a Morning meets them -
The Wind -
No nearer Neighbor - have they -
But God -

The Acre gives them - Place -
They - Him - Attention of Passer by -
Of Shadow, or of Squirrel, haply -
Or Boy -

What Deed is Their’s unto the General Nature
What Plan
They severally - retard - or further -
Unknown -

(c. late 1863, Fasc.37/F778)

The poem's opening stanza is dominated by three concepts (Design, Order, Action), the bundling of which makes for an argument that many commentators take to be against religious conceptions of God existing in his creation. Cynthia Griffin Wolff's commentary on the poem is representative of the criticism in this sense:

Dickinson contests the age-old theological argument "from 'Design,'" an argument claiming that the existence of a highly structured, orderly universe necessarily implies the existence of a benevolent architect, God. The verse itself *enacts* the counterargument by subverting the grammatical structures that impart order and "design" to language; its carefully modulated disjunctions, then, become a coherently aesthetic reflection of cosmic disorder. ("Emily Dickinson" 142)

Like the other big words in the poem, "Design" takes many senses in the language and plays on two of them in particular. Written approximately four years after Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859), the poem employs the word in the sense recorded by the *OED* as "Fulfilment of a prearranged plan; adaptation of means to an end. Chiefly in theological contexts, with reference to the belief that the universe manifests divine forethought and testifies to an intelligent creator, usually identified as God" (n. sense I.5). This sense was still newly-charged in Dickinson's religious culture, before it became still-charged, as it mostly seems to be in the religious and counter-religious cultures of the present time. To say that the trees are "Without Design" does seem to deny that any "fulfilment of a prearranged plan" is possible, or that God's thumbprint can be found in "creation." It is an argument which is patently opposed to the kind of instruction the poet received at Mount Holyoke.

In itself, this sense of "design" does not pose a problem, but limiting "design" to "divine plan" eclipses the word "Apparent" in the first stanza, a word which qualifies "Action," certainly, and possibly also the other two nouns in the stanza. Also, it takes no account of how

the final stanza echoes back to qualify the first. “Deed” in the last stanza mirrors “Action” in the first, while “Plan” recalls “Design” and “Order” at once. The assertion that the trees stand “Without Design” takes on a considerably weaker meaning when we consider the poem’s last word: “Unknown.” Dickinson is not able to say what role the trees might play in God’s creation, but while this constitutes a challenge to the “argument from design” there is no evidence in the poem to suggest she takes aim at “the existence of a benevolent architect, God.” The woods stands for plenitude in the poet’s mind, the experience of being steeped in what is unknowable but benign. The “Four Trees” also represent mystery to Dickinson, but the experience she describes of perceiving them suggests a solitary observer who is struggling to recover her sense of the enchanted world.

The poem is not a confession of disbelief but a recognition of the speaker’s own creaturely limitations. It implicitly argues that it is better to approach the mysteries of life with a wise humility. A later poem sheds light on the speaker’s attitude and target:

He preached upon “Breadth” till it argued him narrow -
The Broad are too broad to define
And of “Truth” until it proclaimed him a Liar -
The Truth never flaunted a Sign - (c. late 1872, F1266B)

Although “Four Trees - upon a solitary Acre” at first appears to represent a conspicuous failure in the poet’s vision, the tone of the poem is noticeably different from that of “From Blank to Blank,” which concludes with a sense that she has begun to find the way by groping blindly. This poem seems rather an affirmation of the age-old theological opinion that humans should know their cognitive limits. Milton airs the opinion through Raphael in *Paradise Lost*, who answers Adam’s queries about what appears “Useless” in the heavens sympathetically, but warns,

..... the great architect
Did wisely to conceal, and not divulge
His secrets to be scanned by them who ought
Rather admire; or if they list to try
Conjecture, he his fabric of the heavens
Hath left to their disputes, perhaps to move
His laughter at their quaint opinions wide ... (VIII, 72-9)

In his notes on this passage, Alastair Fowler quotes a sentence from Calvin's *Sermons upon Deuteronomy*: "When men will needs scan of God's works and providence according to their own reason: they shall find things to grudge at" (432), which reminds us of the words of Wadsworth cited earlier. Miller observes: "The various 'Calvinist' groups started from a fresh realization that to fix too narrow limits or too explicit tendencies upon the principle of the cosmos was to court disaster" (13).³ Adam shows concerns that make him typical of Milton's time, after Galileo's theories became widespread, and Raphael's answer would have seemed like mere obscurantism to the rationally-minded people of the century following, as to the same minds now. By the nineteenth century, Adam's sapient descendants turned to make similar inquiries into the fabric of the earth and its life. Dickinson's poem shows a mind much closer to Raphael's than to Adam's; it suggests that rational-mindedness may not be fully reasonable.

Yet, while the poem shows a rare orthodoxy, it shows as well how Dickinson makes as much as she can of the scene. In this sense, the poem represents a perceptual progression that is analogous to that in "We grow accustomed to the Dark":

A Moment - We uncertain step

³ Miller's earlier summary of the Puritan conception of creation is also pertinent here: "It is obvious that man dwells in a splendid universe, a magnificent expanse of earth and sky and heavens, which manifestly is built upon a majestic plan, maintains some mighty design, though man himself cannot grasp it" (7).

For newness of the night -
Then - fit our Vision to the Dark -
And meet the Road - erect -

—where the first stanza shows her almost completely in the dark (“Apparent” suggesting it is not total darkness), the next two stanzas illustrate how she begins to make sense of the scene, and the concluding stanza makes it explicit (as if to guard against God’s “laughter” at her “quaint opinions wide”) that she speaks only of the scene’s human sense.

To use the vocabulary of Emerson’s *Nature*, the poem opens by showing nature not in its “poetical sense” but in its practical or utilitarian one (10). The poetical sense of nature Emerson defines as “the integrity of impression made by manifold natural objects,” going on to note:

The charming landscape which I saw this morning, is indubitably made up of some twenty or thirty farms. Miller owns this field, Locke that, and Manning the woodland beyond. But none of them owns the landscape. There is a property in the horizon which no man has but he whose eye can integrate all the parts, that is, the poet. This is the best part of these men’s farms, yet to this their warranty-deeds give no title. (11)

Emerson’s rather casual enumeration (“twenty or thirty”) reinforces his “poetical sense” that what matters alone is the discovery of unity in nature; the poet’s triumph is to “integrate all the parts.” The specificity of Dickinson’s “Four Trees” reminds us that disclosed perception does not depend upon such casualness.

Emerson’s “warranty-deeds” echoes in Dickinson’s poem in the opening of the final stanza: “What Deed is Their’s unto the General Nature,” where she glances back at the twice-repeated “Acre,” which represents a measurable quantity of land, a property to be owned and represented by “deed,” rather than “a property in the horizon” to be perceived by the eye. The echo is especially strong in the opening of the first and final stanzas:

Four Trees - opon a solitary Acre -

.....

What Deed is Their's unto the General Nature

“Acre” and “Nature” constitute the closest thing to a perfect rhyme the irregularly-measured poem affords, a rhyme further hinted by the fact that these are the only eleven-syllable lines in the poem (the longest). This is only the most obvious evidence of the poem’s form that it is not “a coherently aesthetic reflection of cosmic disorder.”

There are a few other clues that show Dickinson making sense of the scene through poetic form. The word “Maintain” at the end of the first stanza is only established in English as a transitive verb, but there is nothing particularly subversive about inventing an intransitive sense for the verb in a poem, as Dickinson does quite deftly. Although the dash at the end of the stanza suggests we rest, the grammar of the language compels us forward to the next stanza. But once our eye moves across the blank space that separates the two stanzas, we are disappointed to find the rather unlikely possibility: the four trees “Maintain // The Sun.” We turn back to recognise that the verb serves perfectly well without an object. The four trees “Maintain (themselves),” which is a considerable achievement in a culture that encourages the quite titanic feat of “self-reliance.” This sense is supported by the words “Apparent Action” at the end of the previous line. “Maintain” challenges this claim, or rather puts emphasis on the adjective. Like “Deed,” the word “Action” itself suggests a legal sense—as if to suggest that the trees are without complaint. Unlike Dickinson, who seems always ready to bring an “action” against God, the trees “Maintain”; the implication is that they are much more at ease with God’s plan than the speaker.

The two middle stanzas, in fact, turn from concepts to natural description. The scene they offer is not only serene but suggests that a kind of order exists; both stanzas take on sense in light of the phrase “solitary Acre” in the poem’s opening line:

The Sun - opon a Morning meets them -
The Wind -
No nearer Neighbor - have they -
But God -

The Acre gives them - Place -
They - Him - Attention of Passer by -
Of Shadow, or of Squirrel, haply -
Or Boy -

These stanzas strengthen the sense that things in nature “Maintain” without worrying about questions of their origin and end. There is the strong suggestion of neighbourliness in these stanzas, or what would be scientifically described as a symbiotic relationship. Though it refers only to the trees, the remark that “No nearer Neighbor - have they - / But God” appears to apply as well to the entire scene. The use of the collective pronoun four times in these stanzas suggests considerable progress away from the opening, when the eye could not “integrate all the parts”; they are referred to two more times in the poem, never again by their number, bringing the tally to six collective pronouns (three occurrences of “they,” two of “them,” one of “Their’s”). The qualification plays on another well-established theological opinion that God is everywhere, showing how perfectly orthodox Dickinson can be when “right, true opinion” (*ADEL* gives: “Gr. *ορθοδοξια*; *ορθος*, right, true, and *δοξα*, opinion”) aligns with her purposes, a fact to be kept in mind when we come to Dickinson’s language of paradox in the next chapter. The wind is the closest “thing” to the trees; but God, who is not restricted by the laws of this world, is unbelievably closer. It is not only a clever paradox; it also carries the suggestion that the four

trees join the elements of “Sun” and “Wind” in a special proximity to God, recalling the image of the “Wooden way,” which suggests that such proximity is not designed to be enjoyed perpetually by humans in their fallen state. Immediately after the paragraph on the “poetical sense” of nature, Emerson remarks: “To speak truly, few adult persons can see nature. ... The sun illuminates only the eye of the man, but shines into the eye and the heart of the child” (11). This accounts for the mention of the “Boy” in these stanzas. (Dickinson often uses the word as a default word for “child,” as she does here; the practice is striking in contrast to Emerson’s usage of “child,” but it seems defensible insofar as it makes for more concrete description, and is probably also defensible historically as well as in the traditional imagination, where it is easier to imagine a lone boy than a lone girl wandering about.)⁴

Whether or not this order was designed or came about by chance is unclear. The word “haply,” which modifies the “Attention” given by the four non-vegetable cast members (“Passer by,” “Shadow,” “Squirrel,” “Or Boy”) at first appears to suggest it all just happened. Webster defines the word as “by chance; perhaps; it may be” as well as “by accident; casually” (*ADEL*, “haply,” senses 1 and 2), but this opens up a considerable range of possibilities once we remember the word in its context, where the word is suspended between the words “Without Design” and “Unknown.” I do not believe either sense should be preferred; it includes them both and also appears to play on the audible confusion of the word with “happily” (where the “i” is easily elided in pronunciation). To the dejected observer, the oblivious trees appear perfectly happy in their “haplyness,” and they continue to “Maintain” despite the semantic confusion. This

⁴ In “The Health of Our Girls,” an essay published in *Atlantic* for June 1862, Higginson rejects the then-established view that well-to-do American girls “cannot be turned loose, cannot be safely left with boyish freedom to take her fill of running, rowing, riding, swimming, skating,—because life-long injury may be the penalty of a single excess” (725).

brings us to a profound truth about these trees: whatever role they might play in “the General Nature,” they remain content. The portrait shares remarkable similarities with Jesus’ advice to the anxious to “behold the lilies of the field” and become accordingly. The four trees stand there, quite oblivious to being “upon a solitary Acre,” much wiser than sapient man—

Without Design
Or Order, or Apparent Action -

And there they stand—without “a scheme or plan in the mind” (*ADEL*, “design,” sense 2), whether to attack or to appropriate, or simply to trick or deceive; to command others like troops; or to sue them like lawyers; that is, positively Self-Reliant. Although the poem has been taken as a fable of Dickinson’s lack of authorial mastery (Stonum 16), it better reflects her imagination in general. She is a poet of the mind who locates the mind’s “largest need” in mystery, of which she makes what she can. Having recognised that the “Supernatural” is “only the Natural, disclosed,” she did not need to trouble herself with questions about “the General Nature.”

In countering the work of a few commentators in the present chapter, I have been haunted by a stanza in one of Dickinson’s early poems:

Those who read the “Revelations”
Must not criticize
Those who read the same Edition -
With beclouded Eyes! (c. summer 1860, Fasc.8/F179)

I have offered answers to these critics not chiefly to “criticize” them but primarily to expose the neglected topic of Dickinson’s poems of revealed perception. It is impossible to progress very far into many of Dickinson’s poems without recognising how they take part in the tradition of visionary poetry.

Not "Revelation" - 'tis - that waits,
But our unfurnished eyes -

Yet, by invoking previous commentaries, I also mean to suggest the limitations of Lyon's approach to experience. Although I am inclined to read Dickinson as directly as possible, I find little value in simply trying to evacuate the mind of others' opinions for doing so. This need not make reading criticism necessary for reading Dickinson's poetry, which often takes its basis in conventional ways of understanding extraordinary experience. In the next chapter, we will extend this view by exploring how important it can be to consider the traditional opinions encoded in the common language to read many of Dickinson's poems.

Chapter Five

“Plain english” and the Mode of Paradox

“It was dead fact; now, it is quick thought.”

Emerson “The American Scholar”

In a letter he sent to Dickinson’s brother around March 1863, Samuel Bowles echoes his friend Josiah Holland’s opinion of the poet:

To the girls & all hearty thought—Vinnie ditto,—& to the Queen Recluse my especial sympathy—that she has “overcome the world.”—Is it really true that they ring “Old Hundred” & “Aleluia” perpetually, in heaven—ask her; and are dandelions, ashphodels, & Maiden’s [vows?] the standard flowers of the ethereal? (qtd. in Leyda, II.76)

Not only the syntax of the sentence but the tone of the words shows that Bowles is expressing regret at the condition of “the Queen Recluse.” That she has “overcome the world” is not seen as admirable but unfortunate. Yet Bowles’s jocular tone also confirms that her condition is not something that he or her brother was concerned about. In fact, this view of Dickinson seems to have been a bit of a running joke among those closest to her in life. When the poet is only twenty, her sister writes to their brother on June 30, 1851: “Emilie has fed you on air so long, that I think a little ‘sound common sense’ perhaps wouldnt come amiss[.] *Plain english* you know such as Father likes” (Bingham, *Home* 148), the phrase “you know” further anchoring “Plain english” in ordinary usage, and probably mimicking a habit of Edward Dickinson’s speech. Though the word “air” at first seems to lack such an anchor, it gains one by being set in contrast

to the words “Plain english you know.” Dickinson says, “We see - Comparatively” (c. summer 1863, Fasc.25/F580), and we can often comprehend her “air” by tracing its relation to more earth-bound usage.

In *The Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson* (1960), Jay Leyda suggests that Dickinson answers Bowles’s letter to her brother in the following poem:

The Zeroes - taught us - Phosphorus -
We learned to like the Fire
By playing Glaciers - when a Boy -
And Tinder - guessed - by power
Of opposite - to balance Odd -
If White - a Red - must be!
Paralysis - our Primer - dumb -
Unto Vitality! (c. 1862, F284A)

Leyda bases his conjecture on the fact that the verso of the manuscript reads:

I could’nt let Austin’s note go - without a word -
Emily

But whether the poem is meant to answer this specific letter or not, Dickinson’s imagination is consistent enough that it can help us to do so. The poem shows how one speaks after having “overcome the world.” It also helps to explain why Dickinson turns away from common usage.

Though standard punctuation would help to clarify its thought a little, the poem depends on a series of contrasts which serve to ground Dickinson’s sense. It is also assisted by the pairing of contraries. “Zeroes” and “Phosphorus” appear to exist beyond any established meaning, but these two periphrastic nouns gain meaning through their relation to “Glaciers,” “White” and “Paralysis” (for “Zeroes”)—all of which are forms of death in the poem’s thought—and “Fire,”

“Red,” and “Vitality” (for “Phosphorus”), which are all forms of life. Dickinson’s original metonymies—the meaning of which is not established in the idiom, and therefore obscure without reference to the surrounding context—often gain strength from their numbers through related methods of relation making; and once the poem’s basis of relations is established, other associations can be drawn to illuminate what is dark. The word “taught” in the first set of contraries takes new shape in the last set, where “Paralysis” is described as a “Primer.” The adjective “Dumb” modifies “Primer” and, by extension, “Paralysis,” which implies that “Vitality” speaks. The word does once we recall the relation of “dumb” to “blind” and “deaf,” and thus to Dickinson’s visionary imagination. The answer which “the Queen Recluse” makes to the man of the world is that she gains a sense of the world’s immense value by giving it up. “As it takes but a moment of imagination to place us anywhere,” she remarks in a prose fragment, “it would not seem worth while to stay where it was stale” (PF66). Dickinson repeatedly goes beyond established usage to depart from “where it was stale.” The gaps we must jump to take in Dickinson’s sense are greater than those in most poems, but this only requires the reader to grow acclimatised to “air,” or the spirit of the poet’s thought. I have already suggested how we might begin to do so through associative linkages, but there is also a closely related way to do so through the language of paradox.

In a literary context, Cleanth Brooks’s definition of paradox remains the best: it is “a device for contrasting the conventional views of a situation, or the limited and special view of it such as those taken in practical and scientific discourse, with a more inclusive view” (257). Paradox in this sense refers to the poet going beyond a restrictive view of things to perceive the world in its fuller sense. This sense of paradox is rooted in the etymology *para*- “beyond” and *doxa* “opinion” (taking the latter word in the most inclusive sense). Webster gives this

etymology and defines the word: a “proposition contrary to received opinion, or seemingly absurd, yet true in fact” (*ADEL*). Dickinson uses the word in this sense when she writes:

Experience is the Angled Road
Preferred against the Mind
By - Paradox - the Mind itself - (c. early 1865, Set 5/F899)

“By - Paradox” here means “in a manner that goes beyond received opinions.” Usually “Preferred against the Mind,” experience turns out to be “the Mind itself.” We will return to this poem again below, where I explain how Dickinson’s paradox represents the inclusive view that Brooks advocates. For now let this usage of the word remind us that moving beyond received opinion is central to the concept of “paradox” as used here.

Paradoxes arise commonly in poetry; they are forms of appeal, challenges offered to the reader to catch the poet’s spirit and grasp her meaning. We need not read far in Dickinson to find examples of them. In its most compact form, paradox appears in the form of antanaclasis, “a figure in rhetoric, when the same word is repeated in a different, if not in a contrary signification” (Dr. Johnson’s definition, quoted in *OED*, sense 1). A representative example of this comes in the line “What I see not, I better see” (c. 1864, Set 2/F869), which recalls the two senses of “vision” discussed in the previous chapter. Dickinson is particularly fond of using this figure to distinguish between two kinds of paradise—the one that is experienced on earth and the one that might be ours in the life to come. In a poem about an assignation between “the Harebell” and “the lover Bee” Dickinson considers the former yielding to the latter to ask—

Would the Eden *be* an Eden
Or the Earl an Earl? (c. second half of 1860, F134)

—where “Eden” refers to a state of bliss, “Earl” to the penetrating bee. The first line implies an argument we will come back to when we discuss the paradox of fullness in privation, while the second implies the proverbial distinction between nobility of action and nobility of birth to suggest the speaker’s uncertainty about whether an Earl would remain noble after some lustful conquest—or in Eden. In another poem, Dickinson withdraws to read a letter only to conclude by uttering a

..... sigh for lack of Heaven - but not
The Heaven God bestow - (c. second half of 1863, Fasc.33/F700),

where the first of the two Heavens evidently refers to her lover-correspondent, and carries the same sense as “Eden” does in the previous example.

Though technically paradoxical, both of the two previous examples might be considered more simply symbolic usages of “Eden” and “Heaven.” If paradox must imply some sort of dispute with received opinion, the next example certainly qualifies as paradoxical. In it, Dickinson declares it to be a

..... Fact that Earth is Heaven
Whether Heaven is Heaven or not (c. 1877, F1435)

In all of these examples of antanaclasis, paradox implies two distinct uses of a word, but in this case the sense is not simply transferred from the traditional conception of paradise but is achieved in contrast to this conception. To take Dickinson’s sense of the word “Heaven” in each we must go beyond its established religious sense, which implies thinking through that sense.

Each of these examples depends upon a kind of wordplay, but none of them are mere word games; each offers a distinct sense. In each case, the conventional meaning of the word

provides a basis for the intended sense. In most of these examples, the paradoxes do not explicitly reject the notions on which they are based—

..... Heaven if Heaven, must contain
What Either left behind

—but they do call into question the value of such notions. Invoking the voices of the past, the paradoxical mode is a highly traditional form of discourse; but, recalling Socrates’ method of dialectical inquiry into the “doxa” of his culture, it does not tolerate merely conventional thinking.

Many of Dickinson’s paradox poems are not based in wordplay but display more profound reconceptualising:

They say that “Time assuages” -
Time never did assuage -
An actual suffering strengthens
As Sinews do, with Age -

Time is a Test of Trouble -
But not a Remedy -
If such it prove, it prove too
There was no Malady -

(c. 1864, Fasc.38/F861A)

The proverbial opinion that “Time assuages” is ancient, even if the verb used here varies somewhat the current English idiom “Time heals.” A line after the opinion is invoked here Dickinson turns to counter it explicitly: “Time never did assuage.” That Dickinson’s opinion takes the rest of the poem to explain only confirms that it is not already commonly held. As in the examples of antanaclasis, the poem implies two different kinds of “Trouble”: the kind that “Time assuages,” and the kind it cannot. We expect “strengthens” in line 3 to mean “makes

stronger” (i.e. larger), but that is not the established sense of the verb. Though Dickinson writes to say that time does not heal, “strengthens” insists that there is a reward for suffering; we will encounter this idea again below. Yet, whatever the local difficulties of the poem, the fact that one opinion is invoked in order to be countered is clear, and the contrast does not call for extensive explanation. We must know the opinion Dickinson seeks to surpass, and this is not always explicitly stated. But before we move on to consider some of Dickinson’s more rarefied paradoxes, it will be useful to have a sense of how literary style was viewed by her contemporaries.

◦ 2 ◦

Sewall observes of Lavinia Dickinson: “If in her letters she stuck to the ‘matters of fact’ (which Emily relegated to her) and cultivated a staccato style, it was probably in reaction to the ‘metaphysics’—the ‘air’—she saw inflating the discursive paragraphs of her more literary siblings” (*Life* 247). That she invokes her father’s opinion about “Plain english” is revealing; he reflects the preferences of his own generation, his two elder children—Austin and Emily Dickinson—their own. This discrepancy is not surprising considering that Lavinia Dickinson was not only younger than her two siblings but also that they both had more formal education than her; but whatever the precise cause of the difference, her siblings better reflect the young New England culture of their time, which centred around the works of Emerson and other New England Transcendentalists, and in which English writers like Shelley, Keats, Carlyle, and Browning (all of whom might be said to write “metaphysics” or “air”) were celebrated. To understand Dickinson’s own “ethereal” style, we must first know what was at stake in her use of

it, and this is well articulated in the latter half of the 1830s, when these two styles of thought were first put into clear opposition in American letters.

Of those who thought the Transcendentalists mere makers of air-castles, the Harvard philosopher Francis Bowen's attacks on the movement were the most articulate and sustained; and though Bowen did not understand the motives and aims of these writers, the two articles he wrote for *The Christian Examiner* (then the main forum for Unitarian thought) cast considerable light on the kinds of exploration the Transcendentalists advocate and practice in their writings. In the first of these articles, an extended and mostly hostile review of Emerson's *Nature*, Bowen complains that "[h]idden meanings, glimpses of spiritual and everlasting truth are found, where former observers sought only for natural facts" (January 1837; 377). What motivates Bowen's own observations is clear a page later, when he complains that, "instead of comparing truths and testing propositions, readers must busy themselves in hunting after meaning, and investigating the significancy [sic.] of terms" (378).

In his second article, "Locke and the Transcendentalists" (November 1837), Bowen praises the English empiricist for "cautiously and even conscientiously" avoiding "paradox," and "treating the gravest and most abstract questions of philosophy with the same homeliness and perspicuity of manner, that one adopts in the discussion of the ordinary topics of every-day life" (172). For Bowen, the Transcendentalist turn away from Locke's method and style has no defensible motive:

One would think, that men were weary of common sense expressed in pure English, and, from the mere love of change, were striving after what is uncommon and impure. (174)

But Bowen's lack of sympathy for these writers is clearly based in misunderstanding of their aims. In the first of his two articles, Bowen complains:

the Transcendentalists more than insinuate, that the majority of educated and reflecting men are possessed of minds so unlike their own, that they doubt their power of constructing a bridge which may serve for the transmission of ideas to persons so little fitted to receive them. What a frivolous excuse for being unintelligible is this! (379)

—which shows considerable ignorance of the view of his opponents, who were not chiefly concerned with “the transmission of ideas” between author and reader. Several years later, Emerson writes in “The Poet” (1844): “An imaginative book renders us much more service at first, by stimulating us through its tropes, than afterward, when we arrive at the precise sense of the author. I think nothing is of any value in books, excepting the transcendental and extraordinary” (EL 462).

Bowen's own motives are explained by Bruce Kuklick in *The Rise of American Philosophy* (1977): “The core of his thought was empirical argumentation for natural theology; revealed theology interested him little” (32). Dickinson has the proponents of “natural theology” in mind when she writes:

Eclipses be - predicted -
And Science bows them in -
But do One face us suddenly -
Jehovah's Watch - is wrong - (c. autumn 1862; Fasc.15/F427),

where the irony of the last line is exposed if for “Jehovah's” we read “Newton's,” recalling the Divine Watchmaker the Deists made of God. In his two articles, Bowen implicitly answers Emerson's question, “Why should we not have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of

tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs?” For the philosopher, what could not be explained within the Newtonian model of the universe fell outside the realm of legitimate investigation.

Bowen later extends his criticism of the style of the Transcendentalist writers:

A sweeping statement is made, which, in the obvious and literal sense of the words, is a wild paradox, but in which every one fancies, that he can perceive the elements of some truth, though probably no two interpretations are alike. (192)

Such a criticism now seems to have been based in anxiety about the discipline of philosophy as it was then conceived, which Emerson’s “philosophy of insight and not of tradition” seeks to unsettle but is not likely ever to replace. Rather than “constructing a bridge which may serve for the transmission of ideas” through his writings, Emerson seeks to use words in a way that will abolish the dichotomy between “insight” and “tradition”; and the writer who advocates that we “enjoy an original relation to the universe” would probably not be perturbed to learn that “no two interpretations” of his writings “are alike.”

A brief entry in Emerson’s journal for 13 May 1835, about a year before the publication of *Nature*, suggests a legitimate excuse for being unintelligible:

What a benefit if a rule could be given whereby the mind could at any moment *east* itself, and find the sun. The truest state of mind, rested in, becomes false. Thought is the manna which cannot be stored. It will be sour if kept, & tomorrow must be gathered anew. (*Journals* 138).

His point is apparently not that writing cannot “serve for the transmission of ideas” but simply that the significance of such ideas is constantly changing. “Manna” serves as an apt symbol for the thought “which cannot be stored,” suggesting also its divine origin. The fact that Emerson’s

thought is retrievable does not undermine it in any way; by the time we take his sense, the miraculous has occurred once more. Of course, the same “miracle” takes place whenever a writer’s sense comes through; that Locke’s “common sense expressed in pure English” remains not only comprehensible but illuminating centuries after its time deserves no less a name. Yet Emerson has in mind “quick thought” as opposed to “dead fact” (*EL* 56); where Locke’s—or his own—writings contribute only to building or reinforcing of “the sepulchres of the fathers” they are merely “false” and “sour.”

◦ 3 ◦

Dickinson often sides with the Transcendentalists in thought and deed:

Perception of an Object costs
 Precise the Object’s loss -
 Perception in itself a Gain
 Replying to it’s price -

The Object absolute, is nought -
 Perception sets it fair
 And then upbraids a Perfectness
 That situates so far -

(c. 1865, F1103B)

Antanaclasis provides the seed for this poem, in which the common sense of “Object” as a material thing (from which the perceiver is distinct) falls away from the word after the word appears in the next line. Probably the word “Precise” is responsible for the cutting. For this word Webster gives the etymology “L. *præcisus*, from *præcido*, to cut off” (*ADEL*); Dickinson’s marginal variant for this word—“Most oft”—is not half as sharp. The terms of the poem are generally not clear, in the philosophical sense. Of course, it is not a philosophical treatise, but

perhaps by tackling a philosophical concept the poem opens itself up to Bowen's criticism that everyone "can perceive the elements of some truth, though probably no two interpretations are alike." This much must be granted. Yet the poem's general argument is distinct enough. In the opening two lines Dickinson departs from the opinion of the empiricists, that an "Object" might be known as an object. The phrase "in itself," conventionally applied to an "Object," is turned ironically in line 3 to describe "Perception"—providing another illustration of how Dickinson's thought develops out of established notions. Up to this point, for Dickinson the value of what Bowen calls "[t]he observation of sensible phenomena" lies somewhere else than in the definition of "only ... natural facts" (377). She does not state where that value lies, except in the "Perception" that abolishes "natural facts."

Though perfectly understandable, the complaint lodged in an early review of *Emily Dickinson's Letters* (1894) that "one cannot help wishing that the writer's sense of humor had been more persistently indulged, or, perhaps, less persistently translated into paradox" (in Buckingham 381) represents the view of "sound common sense," which is precisely the kind of view that paradox improves upon. To understand why Dickinson goes beyond the long-established opinion that there are distinct subjects and objects in the world, we might also generalise about why Dickinson uses the language of paradox in this and many other poems: the established standards of measurement have been proven valuable through usage and need no advocate, while paradox implies the usefulness of other measures—not for universal application but for the better understanding of our lives.

The meaning of the first part of the poem takes time to grasp, and the second part does little to clarify its thought, which leaves us to do so. The opening line of the second stanza even increases the surrounding uncertainty: "is nought" signifies at once "does not exist" and "has no

value.” The speaker shows a marked preference for epistemology over metaphysics; she is not concerned with “the Fair” but with “what causes fairness,” which to her is the eye of the creative beholder. The alliteration and consonance of “sets it fair” in “situates so far” defines the actions implied in the two opinions, and recalls the paradoxical notion at the centre of the poem, that the perception of an object at once “sets it fair” and “costs” the perceiver. The word “Perfectness” and also the phrase “situates so far” both point at a paradox underlying the empiricist enterprise: in trying to get as close as possible to the “Object,” these observers forsake its true value. The paradox is stated more clearly at the end of a later poem:

But Nature is a stranger yet -
The ones that cite her most
Have never passed her Haunted House
Nor simplified her ghost.

To pity those that know her not
Is helped by the regret
That those who know her know her less
The nearer her they get -

(c. 1877, F1433)

In opposition to empiricism, Dickinson argues that the value of the object (“Gain”) is determined by the value (“price,” from Latin *pretium*, “value”) of the perception.

Difficulty is relative to the perceiver, and a reader with some knowledge of Transcendentalist notions of perception (e.g. Kant’s famous distinction between the “noumenal” and “phenomenal” worlds) would find the task of reading “Perception of an Object costs” considerably easier than one without such knowledge. Yet still, there is something inherently difficult about the language of paradox, and a reader who adheres to the philosophy of “sound common sense” is unlikely to gain very much from Dickinson’s paradox poems. The implication of these poems is not that “the majority of educated and reflecting men” are “so little fitted to

receive” their meanings, but rather that ordinary usage puts us all in the habit of perceiving “so far” beyond the deeper significance of things. Even at the present time, when so many “educated and reflecting” persons can see beyond the tradition commonly represented by Locke, idiomatic usage habitually binds us to the ordinary opinion. The poem’s style reflects its thought, but it also seems to result from the fact that there is no idiomatic way of arguing with the common view. What Bowen calls “homeliness and perspicuity of manner” implies the most common view. The poem yields at least this moral for style: the worldview implied in “common sense expressed in pure English” is at best limited, at worst distant from the things of this world.

These thoughts apply as well to Dickinson’s definition of “Experience,” which not only goes beyond established opinion but also argues for the need to do so in order to have experience at all:

Experience is the Angled Road
Preferred against the Mind
By - Paradox - the Mind itself -
Presuming it to lead

Quite Opposite - How complicate
The Discipline of Man -
Compelling Him to choose Himself
His Preappointed Pain -

This poem adds to Dickinson’s critique of “sound common sense,” as the word “Paradox” suggests, and appears to take as its point of departure the opinion that “doing” and “thinking” are distinct activities and that the former is preferable to the latter. The poem argues that “Experience,” which necessarily involves “Pain,” is the result of “the Mind” extending itself upon “the Angled Road” of the actual world. From this conception the poet draws the moral that

the entire “Discipline of Man,” or education in the inclusive sense, is based in suffering, and anyone with a desire to learn must submit to pain.

This is not to suggest that the poem is without simple pleasures. The poem involves a sort of back-pun on the etymology of “education,” which Webster traces to Latin “*educō, educare*; *e* and *duco*, to lead”—

By - Paradox - the Mind itself -
Presuming it to lead

Quite Opposite -

—where the stanzaic enjambment enacts the sense of “lead” by compelling us forward. Yet the referent of the pronoun remains uncertain; we are left wondering what leads, and what follows. Presuming that “it” refers to “the Mind” (a presumption supported by the appearance of the word in “*itself*”), the poet qualifies her paradoxical definition, which is “Quite Opposite” to the one stated in the opening two lines (“Experience” is not “the Angled Road” but is rather “the Mind itself”). The qualification includes as well the playful, if slightly uncharitable, suggestion that some people might not use their minds at all. The confusion caused by the indefinite pronoun invites readers to enact its sense. We are led to presume what it means, to “try” out possible meanings; the reader’s mind is made to act upon the words on the page which, though already established, will yield very little to the mind that presumes nothing about them. The occurrence of “pre” at the head of three different words in the brief poem provides a kind of visual and aural motif to reinforce the sense that experience only amounts to the mind you bring to it; this sense is turned ironically in the first word “Preferred,” which Webster defines as “to bear or carry in advance, in the mind, affections, or choice” (sense 1). Students frequently respond with excitement to poems that involve such formal games.

Though it directly challenges the view of “Experience” as the great preceptor who guides the passive “Mind” out of darkness, this opinion serves chiefly as the poem’s point of departure. Webster’s primary sense of the word, rooted in Latin “*experientia*, from *experior*, to try,” supports Dickinson’s definition:

Trial, or a series of trials or experiments; active effort or attempt to do or to prove something, or repeated efforts.

Yet this only takes us halfway through the poem. When the second half is considered, the poem might seem the work of a mind flitting away in ether, its only basis in experience a very limited and unfortunate “series of trials.” Or it might seem to be spun entirely out of “the Mind itself”—based on the sense of “trial” as

Experience; suffering that puts strength, patience or faith to the test; afflictions or temptations that exercise and prove the graces or virtues of men (*ADEL*, sense 4),

which the poet forces onto the root sense of “experience.” Webster himself suggests the connection: “Trial from suffering or enjoyment; suffering itself; the use of the senses” (*ADEL*, “experience,” sense 3), but this would still reduce Dickinson’s definition to the partial. If it were a complete definition, who would willingly choose to “gain” experience, or “broaden” it, at all?

Dickinson assumes that humans generally enjoy the power to choose, if not also the choice:

Compelling Him to choose Himself
His Preappointed Pain -

Summoning up the debates over “free will” and “predestination,” the poet shifts the emphasis from theology to individual psychology. Though the dilemma may have been implanted in us by God at creation or it may simply be an effect of the Fall, for Dickinson it is up to us “to choose” what we experience, and hence what particular “Pain” we must undergo. The phrase “Preappointed Pain” involves a ghost pun on “Preappointed *Plan*,” the substitution of “Pain” suggesting at once the fruits of the Fall, or how the plan evolved to suit the post-lapsarian world. The “p” sound is woven throughout the poem (“Experience,” “Preferred,” “Paradox,” “Presuming,” “Opposite,” “complicate,” “Discipline,” “Compelling”), culminating in the three stressed occurrences of the sound in the last two words: “Preappointed Pain,” where the last word has been made to sound inevitable. Yet, these sound effects aside, there is nothing inevitable about this conclusion. As a summation of human experience, “Pain” still seems a bit partial. We might suspect that Dickinson is only conducting a sort of modern-day census of angels upon pin-tops, or that her definition represents only the mind of a person too removed from the world for her own good or whose morbid sensibility impelled her to “overcome the world” in the first place. Such suspicions are unfounded.

One of Dickinson’s known literary heroes, Carlyle quotes the saying “Experience is the best of schoolmasters, only the school fees are heavy” (*Critical and Miscellaneous Essays* 198). Her own word “Discipline” comprehends not only “education; instruction; cultivation and improvement” but also the time-honoured teaching method of “correction; chastisement ... as the *discipline* of the strap” (*ADEL*, senses 1 and 5), the latter sense recalling that each experience we “choose” has certain consequences. The association between wisdom and suffering has ancient roots, but it remained for Dickinson’s fellow New Englander John Dewey to articulate the

relation between experience and pain. Distinguishing between “inchoate” and “developed” experience, Dewey asserts of the latter:

There is ... an element of undergoing, of suffering in its large sense, in every experience. Otherwise there would be no taking in of what preceded. For “taking in” in any vital experience is something more than placing something on the top of consciousness over what was previously known. It involves reconstruction which may be painful. Whether the necessary undergoing phase is by itself pleasurable or painful is a matter of particular conditions. (42)

This conception undergirds Dewey’s pragmatism, suggesting that if Dickinson was mistaken about experience, it was not from being simply caught in the clouds. This passage shines much light on the importance of organic form in her poetics.

Yet Dewey takes us only halfway; for Dickinson does not settle for saying that experience “*may* be painful.” We recall that she says:

There is a strength in proving that it can be borne
Although it tear -

We recall too our definition of “Circumference” as an area of consciousness bought at some expense,¹ and also Dickinson’s image of “cedar Feet,” a symbol at once of poetry’s buoyancy and of its miraculous power. To Dickinson, “Experience” stands for that area of consciousness; it is not something that can be simply transferred from one mind to another but each layer or “ring” of her mind represents a period of original growth. Probably the greatest poet of the least “experience” in the ordinary sense, Dickinson was in a good position to recognize the limitations

¹ Cf. Linda Munk’s remark about Dickinson’s phrase “Christ’s own personal Expanse” (F1573): “Christ’s Expanse was obtained at the Expense of the Crucifixion” (242).

of that sense. As a woman in the nineteenth century, Dickinson could not write of gaining her sea legs on an actual ship, as Melville does. She writes:

There is no Frigate like a Book
To take us Lands away (c. 1873, F1286B)

Having heard experience described as offering instruction, Dickinson accepts the opinion but feels compelled to clarify the meaning of “experience.” She knew that she had it too. Richard Wilbur’s description of Dickinson’s poetry as insisting on “maximum consciousness” (46) is on view in this poem. It offers a comprehensive definition of what it is like to be as fully conscious as one can be.

“Experience is the Angled Road” formally demonstrates its own thesis. This is typical of Dickinson’s originality, but this poem might be taken as one of her most self-reflexive commentaries on her poetic craft, and perhaps also on her life. No less than in “Perception of an object costs,” the poem’s use of the paradox adds to its complexity, making painful any legitimate experience of it. The poem seems as if it were designed to conceal its own wholeness, determined to yield its secrets only to those who make substantial efforts to uncover them; it makes compulsory the reader’s own active engagement. The syntax of the poem is very dense and intricate, and its non-standard punctuation (“By - Paradox” and “How Complicate” both represent the beginning of new clauses) and deviations from grammar (where “Complicate” is a past participle with the final “d” clipped off) only make the going a little tougher. Obscurity compels the reader to trace out the connections the poem draws; the language of the poem is too removed from idiomatic usage to cohere without thinking hard about it. Dickinson has a strong practical reason for making the form fit the thought here; the compression of the utterance makes it impossible to “experience” her poem except by extending our minds repeatedly to discover

possible meanings and to assay them upon the facts of the poem—actions that involve the pain of thwarted expectations, as well as that of bearing so many possible meanings in mind at once. By the time we make it to the poem’s conclusion we will have “experienced” the new definition by struggling through the poem. It offers us an experience of the opinion it advances.

◦ 4 ◦

In “Sumptuous Destitution” (1960), Wilbur explores the poet’s “repeated assertion of the paradox that privation is more plentiful than plenty; that to renounce is to possess the more; that ‘The Banquet of abstemiousness / Defaces that of wine’” (38). He then adds:

We may say, if we like, with some of the poet’s commentators, that this central paradox of her thought is a rationalization of her neurotic plight; but we had better add that it is also a discovery of something about the soul. (39)

Wilbur then discusses the discoveries Dickinson makes in two poems. The first is often anthologised, and its general argument is stated in the opening stanza:

Success is counted sweetest
By those who ne’er succeed.
To comprehend a nectar
Requires sorest need. (c.1859, F112)

Although Wilbur’s claim that Dickinson is “arguing the *superiority* of defeat to victory” (40) seems doubtful to me, he shines good light on the poem in posing and answering a question it raises:

What do the victors have but victory, a victory which they cannot fully savor or clearly define? They have paid for their triumph by a sacrifice of awareness; a material gain has cost them a spiritual loss. For the dying soldier, the case is reversed: defeat and death are attended by an increase of awareness, and material loss has led to spiritual gain. (40-1)

This asserts how far beyond received opinion Dickinson can go in her writing; to follow her, we must reconsider our conventional—and, probably, very deeply engrained—ideas about possession and presence. The argument of the poem will seem the height of foolishness when measured by “sound common sense” or any other practical standard. But Dickinson is not composing a guidebook for combat but using the image of the defeated soldier to reflect upon the experiences of achievement and frustration. Her view of appetite competes with the more famous one given in Aesop’s fable of the fox in the vineyard, lines 3-4 implying that the fox was just not hungry enough.

Dickinson is not inclined to declare sour the “grapes” she cannot reach, as the second poem shows:

Undue Significance a starving man attaches
To Food -
Far off - He sighs - and therefore - Hopeless -
And therefore - Good -

Partaken - it relieves - indeed -
But proves us
That Spices fly
In the Receipt - It was the Distance -
Was Savory -

(c. second half of 1863, Fasc.29/F626)

The irony of such reflections stands out if we recall Dickinson’s social station and the material comforts she enjoyed; if she ever experienced starvation, it was voluntary. But, like the poem on

the soldier, this one is concerned with spiritual values. Wilbur comments: “The moral is plain: once an object has been magnified by desire, it cannot be wholly possessed by appetite ... the frustration of appetite awakens or abets desire, and that the effect of intense desiring is to render any finite satisfaction disappointing” (39-40). To enjoy perpetual peace on earth, in our spirits and in our relations with others, we would be stuck eating meat and potatoes forevermore.

Dickinson had a keen taste for “Spices,” and what we know of her life suggests that she was willing to experience the privations of social life to enjoy them. It is by our exclusion from the spiritual world, or rather by the eclipsing of this world by the physical one, that we come to value both worlds: the spiritual world for itself, and the physical one for the only point of access into the higher life of which we can be certain.

Hunger is Dickinson’s figure for the state in which the true values of things are revealed, when something “Better - than Music” is heard and nature lies disclosed to be perceived in its true sense. The same ideas underpin the final example, her well-known poem of renunciation:

Renunciation - is a piercing Virtue -
The letting go
A Presence - for an Expectation -
Not now -
The putting out of Eyes -
Just Sunrise -
Lest Day -
Day’s Great Progenitor -
Outvie
Renunciation - is the Choosing
Against itself -
Itself to justify
Unto itself -
When larger function -
Make that appear -
Smaller - that Covered Vision - Here -

(c. late 1863, Fasc.37/F782)

Judging from the existing commentaries on it, this is probably Dickinson's most completely misunderstood poem. This is understandable, since it is probably also her most thoroughly paradoxical poem; but it is also unfortunate, since it provides a crucial key to her thought. Immediately after noting that the poem "continues to baffle even her ardent readers," David Porter claims that it represents Dickinson's "deeply held belief in the virtue of renouncing present pleasure for anticipated bliss" (*Modern* 45), which demonstrates how the poem continues to baffle serious readers. The trouble with Porter's claim is that it would reduce to orthodoxy a poem that goes beyond the received senses of its main words; the claim transforms a radically non-conformist poet into an ascetic saint. Webster traces "renounce" back to the root "*re* and *nuncio*, to declare, from the root of *nomen*, name"; although the poem invokes conventional ideas about renunciation, its intention with these words is to "name" them "anew."

Although the poem draws heavily on conventional language, it does not rest on the established meanings of this language; it puts words in combinations that make them imply certain meanings which the poem itself renounces. It is a poem *of* renunciation not only in being about this subject but in "casting off" the meanings of the words in which it is written, including those usually associated with the word "renunciation" itself. Helen Vendler rightly notes that the word "Renunciation" is "so much in common usage that everybody knows what it means" (330), but she never recognises how far the poem goes beyond this sense of the word. This leads Vendler to conclude that the poem is in fact a "double poem," in which the first represents "the Renunciation taught by religion, which measures all values as seen by God," the second "the critical virtue that Dickinson taught herself" (330, 332). Such a view of the poem is the result of the dense and largely uncertain relations between its words, and created by the fact that so many of these are fraught with conventional religious associations. Vendler never states the meaning

“so much in common usage,” but it is explained a little later on when she says that the “first of Dickinson’s two ‘poems’ has recommended—as a virtue—the performance of horrifying violence on oneself in a preemptive propitiation of God’s potential wrath” (332). The poem naturally suggests this common notion, but the definition it advances (from the first line to the last) is quite original; read as a whole, the poem thoroughly rejects such insanity, being rather a profession of Dickinson’s commitment to disclosed perception:

The putting out of Eyes -
Just Sunrise -
Lest Day -
Day’s Great Progenitor -
Outvie

It is not just the first line here that echoes in the poem that opens thus:

Before I got my eye put out -
I liked as well to see
As other creatures, that have eyes -
And know no other way -

—but the scenario in both poems is the same. Or, recalling “At Half past Three, a single bird,” we could say that “Sunrise” is “Presence” and “Place” is “Day.” After she extinguishes sense perception, Dickinson finds “Just Sunrise,” the adjective sustaining two primary senses at once, both the general sense of “only” and Webster’s etymological sense of “straight,” the latter of which invites a host of senses carrying a range of moral, religious, judicial, and aesthetic connotations. These include “regular; orderly; due; suitable,” “exactly proportioned; proper,” “upright; honest,” “righteous; ... living in exact conformity to divine will,” “exact; proper; accurate,” “founded in truth and fact,” “innocent; blameless; without guilt,” and also “true to

promises; faithful” (*ADEL*, senses 1-2, 5-6, 8-10, 12). All of these senses help to gloss what Dickinson has in mind in the phrase “a piercing Virtue.” The sound relation between “Just” and “Lest” hints at the contrast the poem sets up. The “virtue” is not practised as “a preemptive propitiation of God’s potential wrath” but “Lest Day” eclipse “Just Sunrise.” The poem involves nothing morbid; it makes perfect sense as an expression of a belated Calvinist who is going beyond the traditional conception of renunciation not to rebel but to return vitality to the language she inherits.

This is especially seen in the first half of the poem, in the sequence of words “Renunciation,” “piercing Virtue,” “Presence,” “The putting out of Eyes,” “Day’s Great Progenitor.” Put in relation as they are, these words suggest a radical asceticism based on Christ’s admonition, “And if thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out” (Matthew 5:29). That the poem invokes this idea without ultimately authorising it suggests a desire to renounce the merely conventional opinion (which leads the other members of her family to “address an Eclipse, every morning”) in light of the disclosed one; it shows that she has “overcome the world” only in a special sense. Ever watchful of complacency, Dickinson probably considered it something of a moral duty to use such extreme figures. Although the risk of such figures being taken literally will always be high where “sound common sense” prevails, New England literary culture was quite secure in liberal values in her time, and Dickinson evidently did not worry that she might be misunderstood.

The word “Virtue” is made to serve a double function in the poem. On the one hand, it summons up a network of orthodox beliefs and practices, summed up in the sense “moral goodness” (*ADEL*, sense 3). Yoked to “piercing,” the word calls to mind a range of images from the Christian tradition, beginning with the stigmata of Jesus. On the other hand, the word carries

the etymological sense of “force, strength, power.” Although this sense has now been almost completely retired from use (occurring chiefly in the phrase “by virtue of”), it is found throughout the nineteenth century and informs most of the meanings Webster defines, including the principal one (“Strength; that substance or quality of physical bodies, by which they act and produce effects on other bodies”), which he describes as the word’s “literal and proper sense.” In a letter Dickinson says, “Cherish Power - dear - Remember that stands in the Bible between the Kingdom and the Glory, because it is wilder than either of them” (c. 1878, L583). That is the sense here: the “force, strength, power” of renunciation. The word is designed to call up the conventional sense of “moral goodness,” but it chiefly refers to a power one might wield on earth.

The image of “The putting out of Eyes” belongs to the prophetic tradition symbolised in the “blind seer.” The notion of “piercing” through appearances is conventional, but it is developed into a theory of the imagination by John Ruskin in the second volume of *Modern Painters* (1846). For Ruskin, this “penetrating, possession-taking faculty” is “the highest intellectual power of man.” Acting “intuitively and without reasoning,”

its function and gift are the getting at the root, its nature and dignity depend on its holding things always by the heart. Take its hand from off the beating of that, and it will prophesy no longer; it looks not in the eyes, it judges not by the voice, it describes not by outward features, all that it affirms, judges, or describes, it affirms from within. (250-1)

In her second letter to Higginson, Dickinson names “Mr Ruskin” as one of three writers she has (the ambivalent verb is hers) “For prose” (25 April 1862, L261), but whether or not she knew his work first-hand “no other critic had ever made himself felt so directly as a force to be reckoned with in all the fields of criticism” and Ruskin had a profound influence on the literary culture of

the period (Warren 171). Dickinson's "piercing Virtue" is an example of the power of penetrating through appearance ("Day") to the underlying reality and to its cause ("Day's Great Progenitor").

The contrast set up between "Presence" and "Expectation" makes it clear that the first word does not simply take the general sense, "The existence of a person or thing in a certain place; opposed to *absence*" (*ADEL*, sense 1), but rather denotes: "State of being in view; sight" (sense 4). It refers to appearance, or what Ruskin calls "outward images of any kind," and is thus related to the imagery of sight in the rest of the poem. "Expectation" is also related to this pattern of imagery through its etymology (Webster gives "L. *expecto*; *ex* and *specto*, to look"). But this word takes a special sense in Dickinson's vocabulary, being based in her conception of "the *superiority* ... of frustration to satisfaction," as clear from the following poem, which Dickinson writes shortly after her poem on renunciation:

Expectation - is Contentment -
Gain - Satiety -
But Satiety - Conviction
Of Necessity

Of an Austere trait in Pleasure -
Good, without alarm
Is a too established Fortune -
Danger - deepens Sum -

(c. early 1864, Fasc.38/F865)

Defining "Expectation" as "Contentment"—a word that takes the colloquial sense of "happiness" as well as the original sense of "fulfillment"—Dickinson cancels any sense of "anticipated bliss" from the first word. The closest she comes to this sense is in "an Austere trait in Pleasure," which is neither particularly blissful nor something she must wait for.

The paratactic association between “Not now” and the previous line makes it unclear what “now” refers to:

Renunciation - is a piercing Virtue -
The letting go
A Presence - for an Expectation -
Not now -

Going by ordinary usage, the word seems to imply the speaker’s belief that she might enjoy something more “later” on. On this parsing, the only stress of the line falls on the second word: “Not *nó*w (but later).” Once we recognise Dickinson’s special sense of “Expectation,” however, the word “now” seems to take the primary sense of “as a consequence of or simultaneously with the fact that; since, seeing that” (*OED*, sense B. conj. 1). According to this reading, the main stress of the line falls on the first word: “*Nó*t now,” the line being a periphrasis for “Expectation,” a state of being defined by “negation, denial, or refusal” (*ADEL*, “not,” sense 1).

The interpretation I have given up to this point shows that Dickinson is doing something original rather than simply putting into verse the view of renunciation supposedly “taught by religion,” and that the poem makes sense without Vendler’s “double poem” theory. The poem is admittedly very difficult of access. Its syntax is riddled, and there is very little in its words that helps us to bridge the gaps—and much more in them that puts us off the track. Yet imagery of vision runs throughout the poem, as does a system of oppositions; together, these guide us through the poem.

What is most striking about the second part of the poem is the fact that the meaning of the words is suddenly, dramatically obscured. Although the first part requires us to infer the relations

between words, it does not at first seem “dark” in any noticeable way. Suddenly we are faced with a string of words of uncertain reference:

Renunciation - is the Choosing
Against *itself* -
Itself to justify
Unto *itself* -
When larger function -
Make *that* appear -
Smaller - that Covered Vision - *Here* -

Working backwards from the “Smaller ... Covered Vision,” we recognise a contrary in “larger function.” This opposition corresponds to the earlier one drawn between “Presence” and “Expectation,” and “Day” and “Day’s Great Progenitor.” The splitting of “itself” into two parts (“Itself to justify / Unto itself”) dramatises, in a sort of psychomachia, the division between the two “sides”—one side of the soul battling for the “piercing Virtue,” the other for “Presence,” the latter taking new shape in the last word of the poem: “Here.” It recalls Dickinson’s divided mind of “Before I got my eye put out,” where she celebrates the ability to “see / As other creatures” while suggesting that she suffers from some physiological condition which compels her to find an “other way,” the body being a traditional site of metaphors for necessity and thus providing many resources to the modern poet in search of images of fate. The argument that

Renunciation - is the Choosing
Against itself -
Itself to justify
Unto itself -

proves that Dickinson’s renunciation is prompted not by fear of hell-fire but by something closer to a belief in self-help. The argument for self-justification in the last two lines carries negative

implications, but Dickinson knows no other way and it is hard to fault her: facing the unknown, she simply expresses how she thinks she must proceed. The idea of personal choice recalls the lines:

The Discipline of Man -
Compelling Him to choose Himself
His Preappointed Pain -

In Dickinson's mind, "Renunciation" is a strategy for dealing with the "Preappointed Pain" of experience. "Pain" may be painful, but it offers excruciating proof of life, and viewing it as unpleasant requires mental blindness. The "piercing Virtue" preserves "Just Sunrise," which implies a creative mental state opposed to "Day," the time of ordinary life, after the sun appears, the "Great Progenitor" is liable to be eclipsed, and the conventionally minded might begin to misdirect their prayers.

Ruskin observes that the work of the penetrative imagination "is often obscure, often half told" (252). But while Dickinson's poem is tremendously difficult to follow—to the point that one might imagine that this is how one talks when pierced with pain—it is achieved with considerable skill. She might have written simply:

When larger function -
Make that Covered Vision - Here -
Appear smaller

But, aside from spoiling the rhyme and rhythm—both of which add to the poem's climax—this "decomplexified" version destroys several important effects. By disrupting the flow of sense on the pivotal word "appear"—

When larger function -
Make that appear -

—a crucial hint about the poem’s meaning is given. Though the break between the last line and the next is very brief, the sense of “Make that appear” is not apparent at all. This is not just a clever pun. By holding off the referent of the pronoun—by keeping us in the dark for another moment—the final line comes as nothing less than a poetic revelation:

Make that appear -
Smaller - that Covered Vision - Here -

Appearances can beguile us. Against its apparent meaning, “that Covered Vision - Here” refers to the world in plain view. One of the variants for “Covered” in the manuscript is “sated,” which returns us to the perspective that

Expectation - is Contentment -
Gain - Satiety -

The other variant for the word is “flooded,” which suggests a glutting of the eyes as punishment from an angry God: the price of original sin. “That Covered Vision” belongs to the traditional language of revelation, but it is the kind of revelation in which the “new earth” lies right beneath our noses all the time. That the repeated use of paradox obscures the poem’s sense hints at an underlying motive for such language. Like “Experience is the Angled Road,” this poem compels us to take part in its unveiling. The mode of paradox compels the reader to practice this “piercing Virtue,” to see past established meanings to other possibilities, and so to imitate the poet’s performance of the “larger function.”

The poem immediately following “Renunciation” in the fascicle opens with the lines—

Never for Society
He shall seek in vain -
Who His own acquaintance
Cultivate ...

(c. late 1863, Fasc.37/F783)

Dickinson's biography affords a variety of illustrations of the ways she "renounced" the world, and insofar as this poem shines light into her life the phrase "in vain" suggests that she was prompted to do so by circumstances beyond her own control. After her sister's death, Lavinia Dickinson remarked of the poet: "Emily ... was not withdrawn or exclusive really. She was always watching for the rewarding person to come, but she was a very busy person herself. She had to think—she was the only one of us who had that to do" (Bingham, *Home* 413-14).

Whatever prompted Dickinson to develop this "piercing virtue," her poems record how she did so in extraordinary ways. Dickinson is constantly piercing past the appearances of things as they are said to be. That her means is language makes paradox her mode. Though many people would assent to the saying that "absence makes the heart grow fonder," Dickinson seems to have cultivated her own capacity for "holding things always by the heart" by absenting herself from the world and all its discouraging cares, which brings us to the subject of the next chapter: death, immortality, and the "Immortality" the poet makes of her earthly experiences.

Chapter Six

Of Death and the Earth

The world may, certainly, be lost to the poet but it is not lost to the imagination. I speak of the poet because we think of him as the orator of the imagination. And I say that the world is lost to him, certainly, because, for one thing, the great poems of heaven and hell have been written and the great poem of the earth remains to be written. I suppose it is that poem that will constitute the true prize of the spirit and that until it is written many lesser things will be so regarded, including conquests that are not unimaginable.

Wallace Stevens, "Imagination as Value"

In a letter written during the Civil War, sometime around 28 May 1864, when Robert Browning's *Dramatis Personae* was published, Dickinson remarks to her cousins Louisa and Frances Norcross: "I noticed that Robert Browning had made another poem, and was astonished - till I remembered that I, myself, in my smaller way, sang off charnel steps" (L298/L II.436). A related image occurs in Dickinson's second letter to Higginson, when she writes: "I had a terror - since September - I could tell to none - and so I sing, as the Boy does by the Burying Ground - because I am afraid" (25 April 1862, L261). Webster observes: "Death is emphatically styled the king of *terrors*" (*ADEL*, "terror," sense 6). A sentence later in the same paragraph, Dickinson adds:

When a little Girl, I had a friend, who taught me Immortality - but venturing too near, himself - he never returned - Soon after, my Tutor, died - and for several years, my Lexicon - was my only companion -

There is a general consensus among scholars that Dickinson refers here to Benjamin Franklin Newton (1821-53), a student in her father's law office from 1847 to late 1849.¹ Nine months after Newton's death on 24 March 1853, Dickinson writes a letter to his pastor, Edward Everett Hale, to inquire about her friend's last hours. A few passages warrant excerpting for the present chapter:

I think, Sir, you were the Pastor of Mr B. F. Newton, who died sometime since in Worcester, and I often have hoped to know if his last hours were cheerful, and if he was willing to die. Had I his wife's acquaintance, I w'd not trouble you Sir, but I have never met her, and do not know where she resides, nor have I a friend in Worcester who could satisfy my inquiries. You may think my desire strange, Sir, but the Dead was dear to me, and I would love to know that he sleeps peacefully. ...

I was then but a child, yet I was old enough to admire the strength and grace, of an intellect far surpassing my own, and it taught me many lessons, for which I thank it humbly, now that it is gone. Mr Newton became to me a gentle, yet grave Preceptor, teaching me what to read, what authors to admire, what was most grand or beautiful in nature, and that sublimer lesson, a faith in things unseen, and in a life again, nobler, and much more blessed -

Of all these things he spoke - he taught me of them all, earnestly, tenderly, and when he went from us, it was as an elder brother, loved indeed very much, and mourned, and remembered. During his life in Worcester, he often wrote to me, and I replied to his letters - I always asked for his health, and he answered so cheerfully, that while I knew he was ill, his death indeed surprised me. He often talked of God, but I do not know certainly if he was his Father in Heaven - Please Sir, to tell me if he was willing to die, and if you think him at Home, I should love so much to know certainly, that he was today in Heaven. (13 January 1853, L153)

¹ Although the adjective before "Girl" has led Leyda to suggest that Dickinson refers here to Jacob Holt (I, liv), a friend of her early teens, she tells Higginson in the previous paragraph, "I made no verse - but one or two - until this winter," where the second number would need to be multiplied by 150 to be actually true, and there are many more facts that point rather to Newton.

Written just after she turned twenty three, “I was then but a child” refers to herself sometime at sixteen, which provides further proof that her reference to herself as “a little Girl” in her letter to Higginson is exaggerated. This letter can serve to remind us that, when the occasion called for her to write “Plain english,” Dickinson could descend from the ether without noticeably sinking. It also points to a cluster of ideas about death, immortality, and poetry which surfaces throughout her mature writings and hints at what originally motivated Dickinson to commit her life to poetry.

Although she claims to Hale to have attended to Newton’s lesson about “a life again, nobler, and much more blessed,” her remark that he “often talked of God, but I do not know certainly if he was his Father in Heaven” suggests she was not convinced that her preceptor himself believed in the truth of his lesson; as if she suspected he might have assumed the orthodox view so as not to “corrupt” his employer’s teenage daughter on this point. Though Dickinson probably stretches the truth when she writes to her friend Elizabeth Holland, almost twenty years later, “Vinnie says you are most illustrious and dwell in Paradise. I have never believed the latter to be a superhuman site” (early summer 1873, L391), her letter to Hale makes it pretty clear that she was interested in the possibility of such a “site” and thought the last hours of her preceptor’s life might help to advance her research on it. Nine years after her letter to Holland, sometime in the spring of 1882, Dickinson writes to a Congregational clergyman to ask, “Is immortality true?” (qtd. in L752a), suggesting that, even if she “never” believed it was “true” she never remained wholly content with her lack of faith.

In an essay that positions Dickinson in light of “the Victorian way of death,” Barton Levi St. Armand traces the poet’s fascination with the dying to “a long tradition of meditation on ‘the last things’ that eventually crystallized into a specific interest in ‘making a good ending,’ in

learning how to die” (58). It is impossible to know just when Dickinson took her first step back to reflect on this subject; but there is enough in the letters to suggest that Newton encouraged her to head off in this direction. In spring 1876, she tells Higginson: “My earliest friend wrote me the week before he died ‘If I live, I will go to Amherst - if I die, I certainly will’” (L457). It seems Newton continued to be a guiding presence to Dickinson through her development as a poet. Newton “taught ... Immortality” to the poet, first, by teaching her “what to read, what authors to admire, what was most grand or beautiful in nature, and that sublimer lesson, a faith in things unseen, and in a life again, nobler, and much more blessed”; then, he died, which led her to face death, and that led to the ultimate question about what to make of the time left to her on earth. Although the explicit lessons no doubt influenced the later one, Dickinson’s answer to the question was poetry, which is what leads her to use the word “Immortality” for what she seeks to write. The word is often associated with poetry in Dickinson’s thought.

She was, of course, backed up in this association by the age-old tradition of calling both poems and poets “immortal.” But poetry represents for her not only verses and writing, but also “Thought” and “sense” more generally, and “Possibility,” the etymology for which Webster notes: “See *Power*.” In the previous chapter we observed how Dickinson counters the traditional connotations in “piercing Virtue” to associate the phrase with the “larger function” of the poet; in a letter she writes to her sister in law, Susan Gilbert Dickinson, about 1878, the poet demonstrates the same belief in a similar way: “Cherish Power - dear - Remember that stands in the Bible between the Kingdom and the Glory, because it is wilder than either of them” (L583), where she has in mind a power “to hold as dear; to embrace with affection; to foster, and encourage” (*ADEL*, “cherish,” sense 2), a power that may be of God, but is certainly of use to those who seek to make what they can of life on earth.

Up to this point, I have indulged in speculations about what led to Dickinson's life as a poet—she “sang off charnel steps” not from any particular grief but from the general recognition that life on earth is precious, and ends. Yet, whatever hopes Dickinson may have had of heaven in her life, her profession of doubt on this point in her works gets to a basic truth about her imagination: it is firmly focused on the experience of earthly life. In making such a claim, I have in mind the assertion of Wallace Stevens cited above, that “the great poem of the earth remains to be written” (142). Though I find it rather hard to believe that Dickinson's works constitute the only substantial challenge to this claim—and am more inclined to suspect it was only one of the necessary fictions to set Stevens's own “oratory” in motion—my knowledge is limited; yet I can at least begin to make a case for Dickinson as a great poet “of the earth”—a poet devoted to earthly things and experiences made more dear by the fact of death.

To do so, I start with a poem in which Dickinson faces the ending only to reflect back glory upon the earth and its life:

Doom is the House without the Door -
'Tis entered from the Sun -
And then the Ladder's thrown away,
Because Escape - is done -

'Tis varied by the Dream
Of what they do outside -
Where Squirrels play - and Berries dye -
And Hemlocks - bow - to God - (c. second half of 1863, Fasc.33/F710)

Although “Doom” is commonly associated with condemnation, the two words are distinct and Dickinson here has in mind the general sense of “judgment,” which is the Saxon root Webster traces it to. Her concern is with the last judgment to be pronounced upon the death of the person

by God, rather than with the one pronounced in the temporal realm by a judge—or Webster's fifth sense of the word: "To destine; to fix irrevocably the fate or direction of; as we are *doomed* to suffer for our sins and errors" (*ADEL*). The poem reflects the new emphasis in Dickinson's culture upon salvation instead of damnation, but she goes farther than the literary proponents of the "Sentimental Love Religion," who merely fell into the Arminian heresy of justification by suffering (St. Armand 52); for Dickinson, we all seem destined for the same irrevocable fate.

Although the meaning of the first stanza of the poem is obscured somewhat by wordplay, the second stanza is quite clear, depicting the universal fate. Invoking the conventional association of death and sleep, Dickinson notes that "Doom" is "varied by the Dream / Of what they do outside," an image pregnant with a sense of the privation of the next life and the glory of the present one. In a letter to her cousin Louisa Norcross, the poet refers to death as "the dreamless sleep" (31 December 1861, L245), which makes for a far more restful conception of the afterlife than the one the poem advances. No other positive statement is made about the existence after this one; "the Dream / Of what they do outside" is the best the doomed, or dead, can be said to do. It is worth noting that she does not say that doom is "varied by the Dream / Of what they do *on high*," and also how "Dream" provides a rich acoustic variation on "Doom," implying a natural relation between the two ideas. Dickinson states her opinion on the subject in the opening line of an earlier poem: "Dreams - are well - but Waking's better" (c. late 1862, Fasc.21/F449).

In the final line of the first stanza Dickinson departs from the tradition of viewing the grave as a temporary resting place, from which the dead will be awakened at the Apocalypse; she sees it, rather, as a permanent state: "Escape - is done," though whether this means "escape is accomplished" or "the possibility of escape is over" is not immediately clear. This ambiguity

seems to be intentional, an example of Dickinson's use of paradox, and how she invokes senses only to go beyond them. The main obscurity of the first stanza comes, of course ironically, in the second line, where "'Tis entered from the Sun" serves to temporarily darken her sense. The image at first deters us from taking it literally, calling to mind the idea of ascending to heaven by a "Ladder" and entering through the judgment of the "Son," the association of Christ with heavenly light being biblical, while the pun on sun/Son is conventional in English. Yet, upon reflection, we see that she means only taking her exit from the great stage of life, "the Sun" signifying "a place where the beams of the sun fall" (*ADEL*, sense 2), as in the idiomatic expression "in the sun."

There is, of course, nothing extraordinary about this sense of the word; as in "Renunciation - is a piercing Virtue," the ordinary sense is only obscured by being related to others in its surroundings that suggest it takes a different sense. The obscurity could have been prevented by a minor revision:

Doom is the House without the Door -
We go in from the Sun -

—but that would have destroyed the delightful pun in "'Tis *entered*," where the latter word plays on French "enterrer," meaning "in earth," being cognate with "inter."² There is also the further

² Dickinson studied French at school (Lowenberg), and shows off her knowledge of it in another poem—

Sang from the Heart, Sire,
Dipped my Beak in it,
If the Tune drip too much
Have a tint too Red

Pardon the Cochineal -
Suffer the Vermillion -
Death is the Wealth

delight of the irony that the image of light eclipses the poet's sense; that the word which is chiefly responsible for keeping us out of the poem denotes "gained access to."

It is a commonplace that death is everywhere. Playfulness about the fact is everywhere in Dickinson, but literary play always requires at least two players, and the word "Doom" that opens the poem has naturally shaded this aspect of the poem for some readers. It might be objected that the play on "entered" and "Sun" is bought at the cost of comprehensibility, but, as I have already suggested, the image of the sun/Son invokes a typical perspective in order to vary it, and "entered" is far more precise as a term than an idiomatic alternative. Yet there is also a more general point to be made, which is suggested in the poem's final lines:

Where Squirrels play - and Berries dye -
And Hemlocks - bow - to God -

If part of the purpose of "entered" is to suggest "interred," and of the "Sun" to suggest the "Son" who fails to appear, part of the function of these three actors and their verbs is to imply the kind of purpose each has on earth.

In the first case, the "Squirrels" are shown at their merry best, playing. In antithesis to the two vegetable images, the single animal image suggests that the squirrels represent the higher forms of natural life, the purpose of which is to "play." The pun on "Berries *die*" is clear enough, not simply because of the subject of the poem but also because the intransitive sense of "dye" takes only a very specialised sense in the language, in which case it would normally be qualified in some way (e.g. "Sumac berries dye red"). Dickinson often invents an intransitive sense of a normally transitive one, as she does in the poem, the usage suggesting a characteristic, perhaps

Of the Poorest Bird.
—where the spelling of "Sire" helps to secure the pun (c. 1865, Set 6b/F1083).

even essential, purpose: as if the “Berries” exist to “dye.” She does so here since to specify an object would omit the “essential” implication. The sense is further implied in the name “Berries” itself; the small fruit “buries” itself by “dyeing,” or colouring the surrounding world. In contrast, the next image of vegetable life suggests the kinds of piety preferred by life forms grown stocky:

And Hemlocks - bow - to God -

—the dashes before and after “bow” adding an emphasis that suggests irony, or what would be better described as a reverential act of consciousness. Dickinson often associates vegetable life with unconsciousness,³ which the word “bow” appears to represent in the poem, obliquely reflecting the poet’s disappointments at prayer (cf. F581, “Of Course - I prayed”). The famous association of hemlock with the death of Socrates, an early martyr of the examined life of “Circumference,” may also be in play here, yet at least the hemlocks remain under the sun. The moral of the poem recalls that of “Some keep the Sabbath going to Church” (c. late spring 1861, Fasc.9/F236), which it declares in its final lines:

So - instead of getting to Heaven - at last -
I’m - going - all along!

—which is precisely the sort of paganism that, according to conventional Christianity, ends in a far worse “Doom” than Dickinson describes. The juxtaposition of “bow” with “play” could suggest that the word “pray” is excluded on purpose, that praying is precisely what the squirrels (and the poet) do not do. Yet, once the poem is seen as an act of naming creation, it might be granted that the major life forms each have their own proper nature (to play, to dye, to bow), the

³ Cf. “A Wooden way / Of Ground, or Air, or Ought - / Regardless grown” (c. autumn 1862, Fasc.18/F372), “I wish I were a Hay -” (c. autumn 1862, Fasc.19/F379).

fulfilling of which is an act of praise to the Creator. The poem's pattern of imagery, in fact, implies a response to the people who take more hardened parts of piety, suggesting these merely imitate the more stolid forms of creation.

The same ideas are given a slightly altered form in the rightly celebrated poem:

Because I could not stop for Death
He kindly stopped for me -
The Carriage held but just Ourselves -
And Immortality.

We slowly drove - He knew no haste
And I had put away
My labor and my leisure too,
For His Civility -

We passed the School, where Children strove
At Recess - in the Ring -
We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain -
We passed the Setting Sun -

Or rather - He passed Us -
The Dews drew quivering and Chill -
For only Gossamer, my Gown -
My Tippet - only Tulle -

We paused before a House that seemed
A Swelling of the Ground -
The Roof was scarcely visible -
The Cornice - in the Ground -

Since then - 'tis Centuries - and yet
Feels shorter than the Day
I first surmised the Horses' Heads
Were toward Eternity -

(c. late 1862, Fasc.23/479A)

Referring to Higginson and Todd's version of the poem, which they title "The Chariot," Allen Tate observes: "If the word 'great' means anything in poetry, this poem is one of the greatest in the English language" (219). First published in 1890, the altered version includes corrections of two rhymes and standard punctuation for dashes, while it excludes the fourth stanza entirely. Insofar as our object is Dickinson's imagination rather than some easily transferable "greatness," Higginson and Todd's version is a travesty of the poem. Whether Tate would agree that the earlier version falls far short of the version cited above is of no importance; it so obviously does. Yet, while I think the poem is great indeed, since it is easier to thrust the word greatness on a poem than to show how it is so, I will assume only the lesser burden of showing how it is a poem of the earth.

Taking exception to Tate's judgment of the same version, Yvor Winters remarks: "In so far as it concentrates on the life that is being left behind, it is wholly successful; in so far as it attempts to experience the death to come, it is fraudulent, however exquisitely, and in this it falls below her finest achievement" (*Defense* 289). But, unless Winters would dismiss Dante's *Commedia* on the same grounds, it is not clear how the word "fraudulent" has any significance here, at least for criticism, which has no right to expect poets to simply follow the established views of theologians. It would be hard to establish critical criteria for judging whether the article of the Christian faith concerning the "benefits ... believers receive from Christ at their death"—as the "Shorter Catechism" in the *New England Primer* puts it:

The souls of believers are, at their death, made perfect in holiness, and do immediately pass into glory; and their bodies, being still united to Christ, do rest in their graves until the resurrection. (31)

—is more or less genuine than the contrary view Dickinson's poem suggests. Employing the persona of a dead person to reflect back light upon earthly existence, the poem represents another attempt to imagine an afterlife. As with the poem on "Doom," this one makes no positive statement about the life beyond; rather, it offers a very dismal view of that life. The poem is a work of fiction which—if we judge its function only from what it achieves—aims not to "experience the death to come" but simply to shine light upon the glory of life on earth.

Dickinson concedes this point in a later poem, "Death is the supple Suitor," where she describes how Death, which comes in "a bisected Coach," "bears away" the wooed "in triumph / To Troth unknown" (c. 1878, F1470). In this poem, Death comes to the speaker in a "Carriage," attended by a mute "Immortality," a sign of her caller's strict observance of social proprieties, which is the closest we come to anything like substance in the concluding word of the stanza: "Civility." Representing what she elsewhere calls the "essence," or characteristic quality, of earthly things, Dickinson observes that squirrels "play," berries "dye," and children "strive"—the last suggesting the height of animal energy. In contrast, the dead speaker observes that Death "slowly drove," a contrast sharpened by the contraction of the two words in "strove" ("s ... drove"). As if this meaning was not already clear enough, she adds that Death "knew no haste." It is for this slow drive with the shadow of a person (albeit one of good breeding) that the human speaker is forced to "put away" both work and play—the two activities of her life that gave it meaning. Stripped of vital human significance, "His Civility" contrasts sharply—even painfully—with "My labor and my leisure too," which helps to explain why she "could not stop" living to die, and only does so after Death comes to call.

The opposition between motion and rest which sets the poem going ("I could not stop ... He ... stopped") structures the entire poem, as is obvious in the three lines beginning "We

passed” as well as in their two echoing phrases, “He passed” and “We paused.” The imagery of the third stanza (“Children strove,” “Gazing Grain,” and “Setting Sun”) makes a significant contribution to this theme, offering a condensed history of animal, vegetable, and celestial motions, all observable from earth, which makes for a striking contrast to the life of the dead speaker; everything is capable of activity except her. This moral is pushed even farther in the next stanza through an apparent hypallage, where the words “quivering and chill” are made to modify “Dews”; the idea is that, in life, these words would ordinarily be applied to her, but in death, it makes more sense for her to ascribe the action and sensation to what only the poetic imagination would raise to life. With this image we have one more example of Dickinson’s art of drawing the “essence” of the thing, an essence she associates with action; just as the squirrels play and the children strive, the dews quiver. The detail may be fabulous but it is important. From the speaker’s perspective, the dews still exist; she does not.

In claiming that the speaker is not capable of action, I have in mind the distinction between the spheres of “action” and “contemplation.” The opening of the fourth stanza proves that she is capable not only of narrating how she “passes away” from the earth but also of reflecting upon that passing. The white space that separates the poem’s two central lines—

We passed the Setting Sun -

Or rather - He passed Us -

—represents a moment of recognition about the reality of her new state of life: death involves no motion at all. Winters praises the 1890 version as “a remarkably beautiful poem on the subject of the daily realization of the imminence of death—it is a poem of departure from life, an intensely conscious leave-taking” (289), and while this nicely describes the purpose of the poem, that

version does not include the fourth stanza, which represents the speaker coming into consciousness about what actually transpired when Death “stopped.” Apparently coming to her only “Centuries” after the event takes place, this fact surprises her, as signaled by the rhythm of the line, which ends a foot short of the expected tetrameter. She makes up for the shortened line in the next one, which is a foot longer than the expected trimeter. This metrical inversion reflects the chiasmus of “We passed ... the Setting Sun // ... He passed Us,” both suggesting the speaker’s momentary confusion, a suggestion that is also hinted in the hypallage already noted.

In considering her use of paradox in the previous chapter, we saw how Dickinson evokes an idea only to counter it. That is the main purpose of this poem, much as it is the purpose of the “Doom” poem; but insofar as the poem might be said to serve a purpose for the speaker, this might be described as helping her gain an actual foothold in death. This recognition helps to clarify the distinction between speaker and poet; the poet is up to her usual tricks, and there are no grounds for believing she is the speaker, who represents the orthodox members of her community, or those at least who have passed their lives in the belief that the next life will somehow be superior to this one. The suggestion is that the speaker has spent “Centuries” after death adhering to a belief cultivated on earth without being of the earth—the belief that, after death, she would be transported in a manner resembling Elijah’s ascent to heaven in a flaming chariot—and that the recognition only comes about after she narrates what really occurred to her on “passing.” The transcendence she expects never happens in the poem. The insistence on the slowness of the carriage ride, and on the dullness of her suitor and their escort “Immortality” (an abstraction which is never fleshed out), has already prepared us for the reversal, but “We passed - the Setting Sun” suggests a departure from the temporal realm for the heavenly one.

The next stanza extends the sense of death as a cold, dark fact. Echoing the three lines beginning “We passed,” the fifth stanza’s “We paused” is striking. We were momentarily led to believe the speaker had been transported to heaven; instead she only goes on existing after death, but not in any sense comparable to the existence she enjoyed on earth. It is noteworthy, if we recall the way “Doom” is “varied by the Dream” in the previous example, that her only dream in death was fabricated on earth. It is an awakening that carries a terrible consequence: she will never experience life on earth again; and, worse still, she is stuck remembering the active life she enjoyed on earth, doomed never to enjoy that life again. In a manner recalling her Puritan ancestors’ emphasis upon damnation, the speaker is condemned to remember her past and think very little; this may not evoke thoughts of eternal torment to all readers, but it is an abhorrent existence to Dickinson, who may have had in mind Milton’s description of the fallen angel after growing conscious of

... the bitter memory
Of what he was, what is, and what must be
Worse ... (PL IV, 24-6)

In any case, these lines do well to animate the thinking behind her poem, which suggests that all the dead have fallen from the blessed state of earthly existence.

While the poem’s rhymes generally suggest irresolution (Small 211), the unusual pairing of the word “Ground” with itself in the second last stanza has the opposite effect. In “The Chariot,” the stanza reads:

We paused before a house that seemed
A swelling of the ground;
The roof was scarcely visible,
The Cornice but a mound.

The editors make this change in obedience to the rule of conventional versification that a rhyme cannot come out of itself, by repetition of the same word. As with other changes Todd and Higginson made to Dickinson's poems, this one ruins a significant effect. The poem contains many uncertainties, but the repetition of the word "Ground" in the rhyme position offers certainty:

We paused before a House that seemed
A Swelling of the Ground -
The Roof was scarcely visible -
The Cornice - in the Ground -

The word "Swelling" involves a ghost pun on "dwelling," implying an unhealthy state of being. Figuring the earth as being fattened by the spoils of death, the word "Swelling" also recalls Donne's proud retort to the spoiler in the tenth Holy Sonnet—

... why swell'st thou then?
One short sleepe past, wee wake eternally,
And death shall be no more, Death thou shalt die.

—which is a confidence the speaker lost a stanza before. Rather, she now seems to believe that the speaker's recognition makes it seem death will go on growing. Although the word "Ground" is repeated, the preposition which determines the sense of each instance implies its own story. The "House" is "of the Ground," as the children of Adam are purported to be; and to that home—"in the Ground"—they must return. The image of the grave as a house is common in Dickinson's letters and poems. In the same year she writes the poem, Dickinson writes her Norcross cousins: "No one has called so far, but one old lady to look at a house. I directed her to the cemetery to spare expense of moving" (7 October 1863, L285). The pun suggests another

activity the dead cannot perform, while the poem on the “kindly” Death suggests that “moving” is something the dead will never be troubled with doing ever again.

By the end of the poem, the speaker is certain only of the grave, and while the final stanza may hold out the hope of something more, Dickinson’s poem provides little ground for saying that it “attempts to experience the death to come.” It is a poem of awakening in death to the terrible fact that her life on earth has ceased and she will never return to experience that life again: the stillborn journey “Toward Eternity” will never end. Granted, the poem is written by a person on this side of existence, and it must seem “fraudulent” if taken as an authoritative statement of what occurs after life on earth. But it is a poem, and as such it makes for a compelling utterance not just of Dickinson’s corpus but “of the earth,” and illuminates the general premise that there is nothing more—life ends at death, which for some would seem to be a greater impetus than “heaven” and “hell” to live in accordance with things as they are. The poem depicts Dickinson’s opinion that death will be a disappointment as long as it is judged by the standards of the earth; the success of the poem depends on this depiction.

◦ 3 ◦

There is evidence in the letters that Dickinson did not always believe that death is the end. In early spring 1884, Dickinson writes to a friend to thank her “for speaking so tenderly of our latest Lost,” and remarks: “I thought the Churchyard Tarrytown, when I was a Child, but now I trust ’tis Trans” (L892). She is referring to Judge Otis Phillips Lord (1812-84), with whom she had been exchanging love letters since at least 1878 and possibly long before, who had died on 13 March in the same year. The word “tarry” could mean “to stay in expectation; to wait” (as, to

tarry in the grave for the Last Judgment), or else “to remain; to stay” (*ADEL*, senses 3, 5), but Dickinson intends the latter sense: “Tarrytown” is a place we arrive at and stay in, instead of moving on. Both poems represent what Dickinson believed when she was “a Child”—evidently a hyperbole or a metaphor for her life previous to consciousness or spiritual maturity. Such “poems of Tarrytown” are easy to find throughout the poet’s writings.

Dickinson expresses her disbelief most memorably in the undated poem:

That it will never come again
Is what makes life so sweet.
Believing what we dont believe
Does not exhilarate.

That if it be, it be at best
An ablative estate -
This instigates an appetite
Precisely opposite.

(F1761)

Such a profession of disbelief attracts those who share it, but while a similar skepticism runs through many of Dickinson’s poems, the poem may or may not be an expression of disbelief in the Christian afterlife; before there was a gash in his side for Thomas to verify, Jesus expressed his own agony of faith on the cross. Yet, whatever belief we take the poem to support, what makes the poem so compelling is that it is based on an argument from experience. The paradox of “Believing what we dont believe” implies that, for some, “Believing” is not the same as having belief; it is an assertion of the will, not the experience of grace. Dickinson apparently distinguishes the two according to whether or not they exhilarate one, as if feeling constitutes the final test of belief for her. If believing had this effect on her, the paradox between “Believing” and “believe” would disappear. Unfortunately for the poet—and in this way she is typically modern—integrity meant the acceptance of division. What had been a state of the soul took on a

merely moral basis. The paradox, too, though it was once employed to (seemingly miraculously) heal divisions, becomes a tool for articulating them.

This is not to deny that Dickinson's assertion of a new faith in an afterlife to her friend is sincere; and it is quite possible, if not equally likely, that she sustained it until her own death two years later, on 15 May 1886. But, as long as we take "Trans" to refer to a transitory place or mode of transit or transport, it is very challenging to find expressions of death as "Trans" in Dickinson's writings. She provides a clue to why in her verse summary of the biblical story of Elijah's heavenly ascent:

Elijah's Wagon knew no thill
Was innocent of Wheel
Elijah's horses as unique
As was his vehicle -

Elijah's journey to portray
Expire with him the skill
Who justified Elijah
In feats inscrutable -

(c. 1873, F1288)

This poem suggests the belief that such "feats inscrutable" are no longer possible in poetry, as if Dickinson recognised with Stevens that "the great poems of heaven and hell have been written" and that poets would have to move on to the more difficult feat of writing poems of the earth. Though undoubtedly influenced in this belief by her age's obsession with realism, and by the associated fact that the Higher Criticism had exploded the biblical miracles, Dickinson is asserting that the age of mythical representation is past. Her own commitment was to life as it is experienced on earth.

Among her poetic statements of belief in an afterlife, one merits particular attention here. It comes in a poem Dickinson wrote when she was about thirty-one. The poem opens with a one-

line statement of belief capped off by a rare period (giving the statement a sense of finality) which is then supported by an alluring analogy; the poem then turns sharply to suggest that nothing further can be “positively” known:

This World is not conclusion.
A Species stands beyond -
Invisible, as Music -
But positive, as Sound -
It beckons, and it baffles -
Philosophy, dont know -
And through a Riddle, at the last -
Sagacity, must go -
To guess it, puzzles scholars -
To gain it, Men have borne
Contempt of Generations
And Crucifixion, shown -
Faith slips - and laughs, and rallies -
Blushes, if any see -
Plucks at a twig of Evidence -
And asks a Vane, the way -
Much Gesture, from the Pulpit -
Strong Hallelujahs roll
Narcotics cannot still the Tooth
That nibbles at the soul - (c. summer 1862, Fasc.18/F373)

The opening four lines could be safely printed as an independent quatrain in a funeral service alongside the twenty third Psalm; but reading them blithely from the pulpit would misrepresent the import of the poem. The opinion is stated so confidently, seeming rather a point of knowledge, that the final lines first come as a bit of a shock. The poem shows a general paradoxical structure, but I see no reason to conclude from this that Dickinson feigns belief at the opening only to fall into “a kind of comical desperation, attempting to convince itself” (Brooks, Lewis, and Warren 1251). But while many capable critics have drawn a similar conclusion from

the poem, this proves only how the poem can be useful for exposing the lack of “positive” evidence not only for, but also against, belief in heaven. Though apparently concerned with the next life, Dickinson rather draws the limits of knowledge in the only life about which we can be certain.

Besides its challenging structure, the language of the poem is confusing. The word “Species” in line 2 raises a possibility of irony. By the time the poem was written, “Species” already carried connotations of what was then called “positive science,” which the word “Positive” in the next line corroborates. Yet, if the usage is ironic, the irony is not obviously at the expense of the faithful. On 30 April 1882, Dickinson remarks to Lord, no doubt playfully, that she “thought Darwin had thrown ‘the Redeemer’ away” (L750). The word “Species” may well pull the rug out from under the speaker—a sort of mechanism built into the assertion to bring about its own destruction, casting doubt upon the opening statement of belief, which though threatened by scientific discoveries remained conventional in her community. But, considered closely, the word rather seems to mock the pretensions of a science that claims to be all-knowing. The precise language of science is used to describe the reality it implicitly denies. Webster traces the word back to Latin *specio* “to see,” noting that “*species* primarily is appearance, that which is presented to the eye,” an etymology which suggests Dickinson is invoking the paradox underlying her poetics of disclosure: it requires an act of imagination to behold this particular “Species,” which is “Invisible, as Music – / But positive, as Sound.” Such a sense is more in line with Dickinson’s thought, but it also suggests that the word “conclusion” in the opening line does not refer to the end of life but to the ordinary boundary of perception.

Such ambiguities are easy enough to accommodate, but the poem’s structure remains challenging. In *The Regenerate Lyric*, Elisa New remarks of the poem: “The progress of

Dickinson's images is toward a kind of whiteout of all those human compassings by which the Unknown is organized for the sake of human apprehension" (160). This is the main intent of the poem: to clear away uncritical attitudes that the belief is commonly used to support, that is, to restore a sense of the world as it is—including "the unknown" which "is the largest need of the intellect." The poem shows Dickinson once again preserving a sense of life's profound mysteriousness, as if she sought to satisfy some part of our "largest need" and also to cast some light upon that need. Certainly her paradox poems are made to appeal to the intellect. Although the final quatrain recalls Karl Marx's more famous metaphor about religion being "the opiate of the masses," the poet is not as insensitive to religion as the political economist. In the nineteenth century the word "Narcotics" would have brought to mind opium, naturally derived from a species of poppy, and these four lines summon up the "lilies" attitude in Christ's parable. Recalling the poem on "Doom," where the same attitude is conveyed in the image of hemlocks that "bow," these lines portray "Much Gesture" and "Strong Hallelujahs" as exercises of consciousness-raising, an activity which Dickinson apparently found it very hard to do. The image of "the Tooth / That nibbles at the soul" offers a softened alternative to the idiomatic phrase "gnawing doubt." It also recalls the "Preappointed Pain" of Dickinson's poem on experience, involving the same association of life and suffering. But the image of the nibbling tooth is far less oppressive than the Calvinist-tinted phrase and admits a much wider range of associations, including but not limited to pain.

The poem does not represent the fall into doubt from certainty but a rejection of the cant that often surrounds the certainty. Dickinson is willing to assert this much: "This world is not conclusion." But what "this world" includes exactly, and whether the assertion refers to the afterlife, or simply to "the 'Supernatural'" that is veiled by "the Natural," remains unwritten. The

description of Faith as a woman who “asks a Vane, the way,” where the homonym “vain” is also heard, points at the futility of such questions. The poem exhibits a tendency of Dickinson’s poetry in general, which functions to unhinge us not from opinion but from dogma; from all certainties that prevent the appreciation of mystery, and only fill our heads with nice dreams. It exposes not the wrongs of religion but its limitations. Taking the paradoxical mode, the poem asserts a truth forcefully to then contradict the attitudes towards the truth which render it lifeless. By itself, this truth can awaken us to thought (as the opposite truth—there is no life after this one—can too), and the poem works to keep this thinking dynamic; as the poem advances it does not reject the opening claim but simply places more and more restrictions on what can be extrapolated from it. The poem invokes the religious belief that normally makes life on earth secondary to life beyond; but it does so to celebrate the experience of earthly life.

◦ 4 ◦

My final example is among the half dozen or so most heavily anthologised poems in Dickinson’s corpus. It makes a particular contribution to the present exploration, showing her allowing for the possibility of heavenly vision at death but asserting her own perspective of life on earth.

I heard a Fly buzz - when I died -
The Stillness in the Room
Was like the Stillness in the Air -
Between the Heaves of Storm -

The Eyes around - had wrung them dry
And Breaths were gathering firm
For that last Onset - when the King
Be witnessed - in the Room -

I willed my Keepsakes - Signed away
What portion of me be
Assignable - and then it was
There interposed a Fly -

With Blue - uncertain - stumbling Buzz -
Between the light - and me -
And then the Windows failed - and then
I could not see to see -

(c. summer 1863, Fasc.26/F591)

St. Armand claims that in Dickinson's community "deathbed behavior was taken as one of the barometers by which one could measure the rise or fall of the individual soul," to which he immediately adds: "If such behavior was characterized by calm acceptance and Christian composure, the chances were good that the soul could be sure of its election and that it was destined to join the Saints; if the dying person railed against death and abjured a hope of heaven, eternal hellfire and brimstone seemed equally imminent" (52; cf. also Whicher 5).

Among the "hundreds of mortuary effusions that dwell on the details of deathbed scenes" from the period, St. Armand cites a passage from Thomas Hood's "The Death-Bed" which employs "imagery of tempestuous struggle" (56)—

We watched her breathing thro' the night,
Her breathing soft and low,
As in her heart the wave of life
Kept heaving to and fro.

This scene contrasts with that of Dickinson's poem, where "the Heaves of Storm" refers to a disturbance among the onlookers rather than in the speaker:

The Eyes around - had wrung them dry
And Breaths were gathering firm.

The speaker's calm would suggest to these "Eyes" that she is among the elect, but she seems steadfast in her unconcern "to join the Saints."

The poem provides another example of Dickinson's paradoxical method. Although its first line raises our expectations about the fly, the poem plays on a number of general expectations which were deeply embedded in nineteenth century culture and are still widely recognised today. These expectations centre around the appearance of the light at the moment of death, or, as the poem puts it, the moment "when the King / Be witnessed - in the Room." We are prepared, in other words, for the scene to play out thus—

I willed my Keepsakes - Signed away
What portion of me be -
And then it was that Jesus came
And interposed for me -

—but, of course, this is precisely what does not happen.

Although some readers and critics take the poem as a send up of Christianity—Helen Vendler remarks: "Mortality, in the person of the monumentalized and actual Fly, possesses the grandeur of Truth defeating Illusion" (268)—I think the poem is rather concerned with denying the importance of Christ, which is quite another thing. No one can deny, however, that the fly enters the poem right when we expect "the King" to do so. Dickinson draws on the language of Christian belief to make this obvious; the word appears as well in Isaac Watts:

Jesus sought me when a stranger,
Wand'ring from the fold of God;
He, to rescue me from danger,
Interpos'd with precious blood. (Worcester 556)

Christ “stands between” God and man not only in his hybrid nature but in his advocacy for the fallen. “Interposed” carries the better part of the burden of Christian belief. Just when we expect the King to appear, a fly happens to intrude.

But while “the King” fails to appear where we expect him, this is not to say that he fails to make an appearance in the poem.

..... and then it was
There interposed a Fly -

With Blue - uncertain - stumbling Buzz -
Between the light - and me -

We have seen already how Dickinson evokes Christ in the image of the sun in her definition of “Doom.” The association is made in the first chapter of the fourth Gospel: “The same came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, ... the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world” (John 1:7, 9). The speaker of the poem is conspicuously not a latter-day witness of the same, though I am quite sure this is not just because He never shows up.

Two features of the poem especially support the view that Christ shows up to offer the way. The first comes in the last words of the poem:

And then the Windows failed - and then
I could not see to see -

Although such wordplay often seems obscure on first reading, as often it serves to clarify meanings through contrast. Here “see” evidently means “have sight” as well as “perceive the heavenly vision” (though which sense the first instance of the word takes, and which the second, remains ambiguous). The second feature comes in the fact that the word “light” is not

capitalised, as it is in the Authorised Version of the Gospel. This last point might seem rather on the “never shows up” side, but taking a view of the whole poem, the non-capitalised word reflects the poem’s preference of earthly to heavenly life. What is most striking about the poem’s many capitalised words—“a Fly,” “the Stillness in the Room,” “the Stillness in the Air -,” “the Heaves of Storm -,” “The Eyes around,” “Breaths,” “that last Onset,” “the King,” “the Room -,” “my Keepsakes -,” “Signed away,” “Blue - uncertain - stumbling Buzz -,” “the Windows failed”—is that all but one of them refers to ordinary things and actions of earthly life. Only “the King” stands apart from these other words, referring as it does to the one whose “kingdom is not of this world” (John 18:36). Ordinary usage prescribes that none of these words be capitalised. But these are precisely the things that stand out to the speaker in her last moments on earth. In contrast to “the light,” these earthly things hold the greatest importance to her. It might be argued that, for consistency, Dickinson should not have capitalised “the King,” but this reflects the perspective of the surrounding “Eyes,” which do not await just some lower-case “king.” In contrast to the celestial “King” that she could have “witnessed,” Dickinson’s speaker serves as a material witness of this world.

The image of “a Fly” calls to mind ideas of death, corruption, and waste, but here it seems to represent primarily a thing of this world. Although it is among the lowest of living things, it is a being in time, and that is its import to the dying speaker. The article that introduces the word pushes this sense even farther: not simply lowly but totally unknown and anonymous. The poem’s articles tell their own story: “a Fly,” “the King,” “the light.” The contrast serves to illuminate the importance of the things of the earth more generally. The deposing of “the King” by “a Fly” suggests a reversal of traditional Christian values, wherein the next life is somehow greater than this one.

In a paper included in *The Living Milton* (1960), Donald Davie first taught how the poet can use lineation to draw an intransitive sense out of a verb that is syntactically transitive. Citing Milton's

Then feed on thoughts, that voluntarie move
Harmonious numbers; ... (PL III.37-8)

Davie notes that while "move" at first "seems intransitive, and as such wholly satisfying," "the next line ... reveals it (a little surprise, but a wholly fair one) as transitive" (73). The "flicker of hesitation" Davie records is not meant to call up the flick of a forked tongue in Eden (he finds only "a little surprise") but "to make the most of each word's eventfulness," to make us witness "[t]he eventfulness of language." This flicker is only momentary, and would not exist at all if Milton had not interposed a line ending between the verb and its direct object.

Dickinson affects something comparable to this "flicker of hesitation" but more lasting, drawing her sense out over a line ending, a stanza break, and a full line:

There interposed a Fly -

With Blue - uncertain - stumbling Buzz -
Between the light - and me -

"There interposed a fly between the light and me" gives words to the conceit that animates the poem, while interposing the description of the fly between the verb and the prepositional phrase of the sentence enacts the idea. The fly's interrupting presence is literally witnessed in the poem as "the King" was supposed to be "witnessed - in the Room," the synaesthesiac description suggesting at once the breaking down of the dying speaker's mind and the kind of "disclosed" experience associated with it. Instead of "the light," we are made to witness the scintillating

force of language, to feel what it is like to be overwhelmed by sense impressions, and also to take pleasure in the play that is possible only in time, which is precisely what “the King” would decree obsolete and which “the light” would eclipse.

If our preference is revealed by the way we direct our attention, the speaker of “I heard a Fly buzz - when I died” prefers the things of this world to those of the next; she denies not the reality of Christ but only his importance to her as the gatekeeper of the hereafter. If she had stopped her thought at the end of the third stanza—

There interposed a Fly.

—Dickinson would have insisted on a blasphemous sense: the Fly not only distracts her from seeing “the King” but deposes him. Here the fly would serve as a stand-in for Beelzebub, not “the King” but his adversary, the Satanic Lord of the Flies, though if Dickinson meant this she would have written “*the* Fly.” This sense is implied briefly by the interposition of the parenthesis between the verb and the prepositional phrase, but this rather seems designed to provoke the sense only to ultimately draw it back. This would have made for a mere bloodless parody of Christian belief. As it is written, the poem invites more serious reflection.

The smaller-case “light” reflects the speaker’s estimate of the Redeemer. The Fly distracts her from it at the most crucial point—her last moments of life; she looks away at precisely the time that all the “Eyes around” have been waiting for. If you can be fascinated by one of the slightest of living things just as the Redeemer has come to escort you to eternity, then you prove your power to find beauty on earth.

Dickinson remarks to Higginson in a letter: “To be human is more than to be divine, for when Christ was divine, he was discontented till he had been human” (September 1877, L519).

This may not be sound Christian theology, but the statement makes perfect sense as Dickinson's valuation of the only world of which she could be certain. Her stance in the poem could be viewed as merely foolish consistency—one last chance to rebel against her familial tradition—but considered in light of the rest of the corpus the poem is better seen as the dramatic representation of her “last words,” representing her own belief that

Who has not found the heaven below,
Will fail of it above.
God's residence is next to mine,
His furniture is love. (c. 1883, F1609),

where the logical inference is that God dwells in easy access to all who recognise that “His furniture is love.” The Christian emphasis on “charity” in the inclusive sense makes it hard to credit the belief that God would reward those who “fail” to seek Paradise on earth, which makes beholding the beauty of God's creation perfectly reasonable and certainly not a blasphemy.

For an artist who seeks to make a living work, parody involves a considerable risk. The parody that exists like the parasite which depends on blood to live but does not put that blood into circulation cannot exist in any real sense in poetry. The success of “I heard a Fly buzz - when I died” is almost certainly due to the biographical fact that the author herself was fascinated by deathbed scenes, especially as a young woman, and that she could poke fun at the literary as well as cultural conventions while having a sense of why they came to be in the first place. Although the poem was written years after her letter to Edward Everett Hale about the man she says “taught me Immortality - but venturing too near, himself - he never returned,” it is not clear which belief Dickinson finally came to hold in life, but it is undeniable that she wrote great poems of life on earth by facing as frankly as she could its inevitable ending.

Conclusion

This Mortal Abolition, This Loved Philology The Great Cause of Poetry

There are probably words addressed to our condition exactly, which, if we could really hear and understand, would be more salutary than the morning or the spring to our lives, and possibly put a new aspect on the face of things for us.

Thoreau, "Reading"

Every reform was once a private opinion, and when it shall be a private opinion again, it will solve the problem of the age.

Emerson, "History"

One of the assumptions that undergirds the present study relates to the function of poetry as a mode of being which reverses the effects of the Fall on experience. Dickinson refers to this reversal as "mortal Abolition" (c. second half of 1863, Fasc.31/F630B), recalling not only the description of Christ in the New Testament as one "who hath abolished death, and hath brought life and immortality to light through the gospel" (2 Timothy 1:10) but also the greatest cause in the America of her time—the abolition of slavery. The fact that, when judged by contemporary standards, the abolition Dickinson associates with poetry is not chiefly social but spiritual has made her seem less significant as a voice of her culture in the last few decades of Americanist scholarship than the more outward tending works of her time, yet applying the distinction between social and spiritual causes to abolitionism in nineteenth century America depends on ignoring the way this social cause found its source in spiritual concern. Dickinson's relative absence of concern with the big "social" questions of her day is hard to understand as long as we

apply this distinction too bluntly, but the task becomes far easier once we recall Dickinson's concern with the essential (as opposed to the accidental) aspects of human life, and that these provide a basis for the life of the community. That Dickinson never appears to have sought to publish her works in her lifetime might serve as a reminder of this fact. In a letter from early June 1864, Dickinson writes:

The only News I know
Is Bulletins all day
From Immortality. (L290)

Dickinson left the reportage of the times to others more capable, and pursued the spiritual questions that have long perplexed human beings, and which vexed so many of her contemporaries keenly.

Dickinson's writings represent her creative response to the profound spiritual crisis witnessed by the writings of many of her contemporaries. Thoreau's stated purpose for going to Walden, captured in the paradox of fearing when he "came to die" that he "had not lived," reflects a concern felt by others at the time. The Reverend E.S. Dwight echoes this passage in a sermon he preached at Dickinson's church on 22 February 1857 on John 10:10 ("I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly"):

The word so prominent here—"life"—is one whose value varies as much as its signification ... Take two men, for instance ... Both of these men are *alive* ... but how much *more* life has this one than that! The one draws breath as often in the day as the other; but you can imagine one day of this one's life to contain as much more thought and feeling and real happiness, and therefore to be worth as much, as years of the other's life. (in Leyda 347).

Dickinson was a friend of Dwight and “apparently consulted him often in his study” (Sewall, *Life* 461). In mid-November 1862, Dickinson tells Bowles, “So few that live - have life” (mid-November 1862, L275), and later asks Higginson:

How do most people live without any thoughts. There are many
people in the world (you must have noticed them in the street) How
do they live. How do they get strength to put on their clothes in the
morning (16 August 1870, L342a)

We have seen already how Dickinson associates writing with “Thought” in her poem on publication; whether we call it “Mortal Abolition” or “poetry,” the goal of Dickinson’s work is to enjoy life more abundantly. Living at a time when thinkers were pronouncing God departed or dead, and when the world of science was being increasingly mistaken for the world itself, Dickinson sought to enjoy a fuller life in the world. She devoted her life to the great cause of the spiritual regeneration made possible through language.

In a letter to Higginson she writes in July 1875, Dickinson asserts: “To have been immortal transcends to become so” (L441). She makes this statement after the death of her father, and seems to mean that history, or the experience of time, is greater than the possibility of resurrection after death—or rather, that the experience of earthly (and thus finite) “immortality” trumps ultimate and everlasting salvation. Elsewhere Dickinson figures this experience as “Poetry, though never in a Book it lie” (c. 1879, F1491), a statement which reflects back sadly on her literary achievements while also confirming that though she renounced an ordinary life in the world, she never renounced the temporal for the eternal. This view is corroborated elsewhere throughout Dickinson’s writings, as we have seen especially in the second part of the study. It provides a clue into the often anthologised poem:

A word made Flesh is seldom
And tremblingly partook
Nor then perhaps reported
But have I not mistook
Each one of us has tasted
With ecstasies of stealth
The very food debated
To our specific strength -

A word that breathes distinctly
Has not the power to die
Cohesive as the Spirit
It may expire if He -

“Made Flesh and dwelt among us”
Could condescension be
Like this consent of Language
This loved Philology

(undated; F1715)

Figuring the act of reading in terms of the sacrament of communion, this poem helps to explain why Dickinson wrote, and why she never made the profession of faith expected by members of her family’s congregation. In a letter she writes to her Norcross cousins, Dickinson remarks: “Each of us gives or takes heaven in corporeal person, for each of us has the skill of life” (April 1873?, L388). The experience of reading represented in the poem is associated with the heightened state of being Dickinson sought in life, “This loved Philology” referring to one of several means she knew for achieving “This mortal Abolition.” The thought which spans the final two stanzas makes explicit Dickinson’s setting the Word of God against the words of women and men. To her mind, “A word that breathes distinctly” alone represents immortality; yet she is willing to grant that such a word “may expire” if the Word who was “Made Flesh and dwelt among us” (cf. John 1:14)

Could condescension be
Like this consent of Language
This loved Philology

Dickinson means she would forsake poetry if Christ could not only exist for her (a possibility she does not reject, though the white space after “be” provides a strong hint of skepticism) but if his “condescension” were as meaningful to her as “this consent of Language.” This blasphemous sense is partially explained by two lines in a letter to Mr. and Mrs. E.J. Loomis for 2 January 1885:

A Letter is a joy of Earth -
It is denied the Gods - (L960),

where the plural form of “Gods” softens the import of the words. The gods of Greece and Rome were not assumed to be omniscient, but this is a defining quality of the Judeo-Christian deity which superseded them in the Western imagination. Alluding to this omniscience—the fact that “A Letter” would be superfluous to Him who always knows everything already—the word “denied” hints at God’s limitation when judged from the perspective of earthly experience. In a letter to Higginson for September 1877, Dickinson writes: “To be human is more than to be divine, for when Christ was divine, he was uncontented till he had been human” (L519). Such a view may seem simplistic from the standpoint of theology, but it hints at the divine power Dickinson finds in poetry—“the skill of life”—and which we can too.

The approach I have taken is prone to seeming either apolitical or quietist in the present intellectual climate. For all of its noble and exciting insights, the age of critical theory has cast considerable doubt over the traditional justification for reading poetry, and it remains to fully address what placing theory at the centre of critical inquiry restricts from contemporary literary

study. Though recent practices of reading seem to provide reasons for hope, I do not think we are out of the woods quite yet. The approach I have taken for reading Dickinson is based in the assumption that any attempt to make sense of the “endless diversity” of a poetic corpus is perfectly defensible as an intellectual endeavour, and that its ethical ramifications are certain. To recognise the diversity of places, things, and beings represented in writing implies developing an eye for recognising such diversity. It requires the putting down of selfishness, and rewards by expanding us “Where the Meanings, are” (c. early 1862, Fasc.13/F320). Whatever limitations such an approach may involve, it is hard to believe that such a practice should ever be discouraged in a discipline that still concerns human experience, and seeks to raise to consciousness something of the wealth of the experience of life on earth.

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